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Natya Shastra in Contemporary World

Satya Shandilya

Student of History

University of Delhi

ABSTRACT

This article deals with the evolution of ideas of Natya Shastra the epic by Bharata Muni which contains an elaborate analysis of the sources of the aesthetic pleasure that one derives from seeing a performance. The primary and sole aim of this article is to highlight the coming of theatres in the era of Post-Independence in India when the feeling of nationalism was also taking birth. Along with the views like radicals and revisionists comes into the frame as well. Along with that this article links the anti-colonial sentiments with the performances affected during the social turmoil. Different dimensions of contemporary modern Indian theatre have been highlighted including the relation between the playwrights and directors and similarly with the media of print and performances. In other words, this article traces the coming of theatre with the origin lying into historical text of Natya Shastra.

Bharata Muni's Natya Shastra is the book containing the theory of drama is unique and famous work of Indian antiquity. It is said that Lord Brahma desired to command some form of entertainment for gods as well and hence, created Natya Shastra. Bharata Muni codified the rules and codes for drama and dance in this compilation. If we go by the common belief, natya shastra is said to be solely on dance, but this is not a fact but a myth pertaining among believers. Instead, it is an encyclopedia of dramaturgy. It provides constituent elements of drama along with the theory and act as compendium for directors, stage-managers, actors and spectators of plays and cinematics. According to P.V. Kane Natya Shastra contains an elaborate analysis of the sources of the aesthetic pleasure that one derives from seeing a performance; it treats of the architecture of the theatre, gives an exhaustive treatment of meters to be employed, the postures, movements and gestures of actors and of the mode in which they are to deliver their speeches, of the different kinds of dramas, the analysis of the structures of the dramas and their styles. It also furnishes directions about the songs to be sung and the musical instruments to be employed and treat in detail of the musical notes and their combinations.

For Bharata Muni the purpose of drama was just no entertainment or pleasure rather he considered it high and noble. He recommended the dramatists to refrain from using any obscene performance or behavior on stage as he aimed to raise the standards of the actors and art as well. In other words, Natya Shastra was not the way it is presented by critiques many a times in modern times. It was a well-planned coherent work

containing thirty-six chapters and sub-division of furthermore categories, out of which chapter six and seven deals with the basic theory of aesthetics and theories pertaining to the context of Sanskrit drama which links the audience's fascination that is called Rasa to the stage performance that is Bhava. In fact, chapter six provides a digest i.e., the Natyasangraha which enumerates eleven elements of drama including rasa(sentiment), bhava(emotions), abhinaya(acting), Dharmi (modes of representation), Vritti (styles of expressions), pravtti (local usages), siddhi (success of production), Swara(note), atodya (musical instruments), Gana(song), and lastly, Ranga(theatre).

Along with these he also talks about eight rasas, forty-nine bhavas and four types of abhinaya, two types of Dharmi, and four types each of Vritti and pravtti. He has further discussed two ways of siddhi and seven different notes of Swara, four kinds of atodya, five variations of Gana and Ranga of three shapes.

Another set of chapters ranging from eight to thirteen are concerned with the bodily actions performed, for e.g., division of stage into different zones which are often crossed by actors in order to depict a change of situation or background. If we focus on chapters from fourteen to twenty, it is related to the text and plot and similarly, twenty-eight to thirty-four deals with mostly music and musical instruments.

NATYA SHASTRA TO MODERN THEATRES

If we take theater into consideration, the very first question would be what exactly was a theater? The word theater is derived from a Greek word called 'Theatron' which means a place for seeing! according to Professor Wilfred Grenville this word itself is derived from Greek verb 'theaomai' which literally means 'to see'. Hence, we can define Theater as a place for the audience to see the performance in a broader sense. In the structural aspects, a theater is a usually a building or a place furnished with seats for audience along with the stage upon which plays, or dramatics are performed, in other words, a playhouse. In other words, it is such part of building where the actors and other performers display their performance on a specific stage.

From the ancient times only the epics of India contains all the potentiality of all forms of interactions, narrations, events, etc., from the end of nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth century we see the inclusion and the amalgamation of the 'foreign' elements in theater, dance, visual art etc., which was produced by the Indian artists only but with the considerable contact with the other world outside India and that is how, they incorporated other attitudes and approaches into their work without losing their heritage by the British-Indian middle-class coteries majorly. It is possible to argue that few parts of the epic which focused on the performances did expose themselves to a certain level of irreverence and challenges as by and large the Indian theater was still marginalized and required intellectual and moral courage to locate and foreground themselves. But even after so many challenges and questions raised on the epic, we cannot undermine the quality of content offered by the Natya Shastra. It often included the familiar stories of good and bad causes, battles, marriages, punishments and rewards, gods and heroes, nobles or scurrilous on the grand canvas. On the other hand, its history, poetry, ethics, entertainment, inspiration and indoctrination remain commendable. The tales reflect the social issues that can be seen or remains prevalent and relatable to the twenty-first century as well; how one racial or cultural group resisted or dominated the other, how human being articulated their relationship with animals they fought, killed and domesticated them, initially either feared and then ended up loving them; how the humans made sense of natural forces and explained the sweep of time and history and apparently, how they tried to understand death. All such themes are covered which even became popular during the modern times and remains still. These tales were not merely made for story telling but for the retelling of the stories as well, they were told many a times again and again and hence, the stories were reborn each time. Performances on these huge stories used to be in episodes majorly but they remained recontextualized and elaborated about the context or we can say that no episode

remained aloof from the core context of the tale. In these terms even though of the interweaving, complex and lengthy narratives we could see the basic structure clearly, for e.g., Mahabharata and Ramayana both worked in the same manner and presented the model of quest myth as archetypal narrative structure. Mahabharata was involved in sub-plots and digressions and even though having a feudal theme but necessarily puts the moral questions and responsibilities as the center in the Bhagavad Gita. Both the epics revolved around the heroic qualities and the ideal kingship rules and hence, portrayed the lesson of facing severe challenges in every situation. Therefore, Ramayana ends with restoration of all aspects except the situation of Sita which even faces challenges and crossfires today. On the other hand, Mahabharata gives less assured vision and modern interpretations have dwelt on apocalyptic vision.

THEATERS OF INDEPENDENCE

Indian theater of the post-independence period of 1947 onwards was evolving outside the theoretical and critical constructs and appeared on the margins of contemporary world theater whether it be printed texts, performance events, entertainment media or objects of scholarly studies. Indian theater remained in the circle of obscurity widely due to the linguistic plurality of Indian theater practices which was of diverse nature as same as India itself. There remained the problematic relations to the concepts such as modernity, contemporaneity, and post-coloniality to drama, theater and performance in present day India. It is widely popular among scholars that the historical origin of the tradition of texts and performance practices is rooted in the genres, discourses and institutions of theoretical modernity which was the result of largely European influence in the cities like Calcutta, and Bombay during the second half of the nineteenth century. In other words, the scholars Eurocentric bent of mind approached the emergence of Indian theater as a part of European influence over India and hence, all the credits should be given to foreign ideas only rather than the indigenous roots according to them. But this new emerging drama activated a cultural identity for themselves and disclaimed the colonial practices and intended to thrive towards reclaiming their classical and other pre-colonial Indian traditions of performances which were followed before the independence as well as the only viable weapon of decolonization.

The theater tradition of past fifty years can't say to be just the extension of colonial or pre-colonial tradition rather it is a product of new theoretical, textual, material, institutional and the cultural conditions that were created by the political independence, cultural autonomy and new nationhood. In other words, we can say that the urban theater practice that emerged after the independence of 1947 constructed a new national tradition. Bruce King has described the postcolonial nations as the "new centers of consciousness", during late twentieth century literature and writings were taking shape in important ways like in "politics of nationalism" and as well as the "themes of long period of cultural assertion and opposition which was part of the context of political independence". With the coming of European ideas, the new modern literary now co-existed with the pre-modern and pre-national histories of performances now and reinforced the idea of "India as an integral cultural space".

Sheldon Pollock has argued that literatures of south Asia are "unrivaled in the resources they offer for understanding the development of expressive language and imagination over time and in relation to larger orders of culture, polity, and society." Along with incorporating the concepts of nation, history and culture to Indian drama, theater and performance in evident frequency the critics often dismiss the idea or notion of "Indian Theater" and the conceptual frameworks of "national traditions". According to many critiques there exist no Indian theater specifically as there is no single approach or concept of theater in India and therefore, no single linguistic entity that all Indians could understand. But this doesn't necessarily mean that Indian theater or its concept will be vanished from the world. All scholars have tried to understand quality

of essential “Indianness” to define Indian theater rather as a continuous and diverse tradition with the history of around three millennia, playing a vital role in the civilization of Indians and in their distinctive aesthetic and theoretical characteristics. Thus, indeed the playwright Adya Rangacharya have asserted that this ineluctable presence of something we call “Indianness”.

We are here not really trying to debate whether the Indian theater was of Indian origin or not? Or whether it came in contact of any European elements and got influenced or not? we are here to witness the evolution of Indian theater, the rise the transformation, the long road that this art has travelled from being present in books to coming on the stage. In the stages of tracing the journey we do face questions, but the question is not at all about whether Indian theater is sufficiently Indian or not, but the questions are raised on the very basic construct of being Indian during the postcolonial writings and era. as mentioned before in other frameworks the “Indian theater” disappears completely due to the linguistic heterogeneity. In the contemporary world terms like Indian theater or modern Indian theater continues to denote sum of theaters in major Indian languages including the Sanskrit traditions and post-colonial developments as well. In the majority of genre of modern Indian works, they have missed out or removed the term “Indian theater” completely, which denotes about the unawareness of the concept in the modern times. According to European model of nineteenth century which dominated most of the period, it says, theater is an expression of nationalist ideology and progressive democratization and has acquired the national feature through its association with national language, a metropolitan venue and selective repertoire and cannot be understood in Indian terms for several reasons including heterogeneity. Deshpande adds to it and talks about the alarming decline in culture of “regional” languages has placed the “national” theatre in jeopardy, in Deshpande’s word, “national theatre is not possible because the provincial theatre has become impossible.” Hence, Indian theatre’s nationality is the cumulative effect of theoretical, generic and thematic emphasis rather than the prior qualities that preceded including the acts of writing and interpretation or authorial effort. Despite all such difficulties we can possibly construct the argument that urban theatre of post-independence period is both an Indian and a national tradition. Indian theatre has been qualitatively different and more complex than other contemporary national traditions. It would be appropriate then to establish the post-independence urban theatrical “canon” as the aggregation of texts and performances, mediated by a range of aesthetic choices, institutions and reception contexts. There could be three approaches to pursue the issue of canon formation in modern theatre which are antithetical historical movements.

The first movement consisted of increasingly powerful identification of theatre with nation during 1870s to 1940s, where initially nationalist or anti-colonial expressions and thoughts emerged on regional level like in Bengali and Marathi theatre and later took the national shape in forms of Indian People’s Theatre Association, The Indian Nation Theatre, and The Bhartiya Natya Sangha (Indian theatre guild).

The second movement was organised largely by nation-state and cultural bureaucracy during 1950s and weakened the position of the first movement where radical though processes were accepted and developed or gave birth to revisionary view of theatre’s socio-cultural role in newly independent nation.

The third movement was about explosion in theatre activity in terms of playwriting and production which shaped the post-independence traditions between 1950 and 1980 and this was not connected with either radical or revisionist views of till 1950s.

Along with these approaches we see coming up of new opportunities like the Nehru Festival during contemporary Indian Theatre of 1989, the festival is mentioned in the Sangeet Natak Akademi’s companion volume. Personalities like Girish Karnad, the Kannada playwright and Akademi’s chair and Rajinder Paul, editor of theatre magazine Enact and Akadmi’s vice-chair has described the festival as a “retrospective of modern Indian theatre” as it was on an unusual large scale, and it was “an experiment without precedent.”

Contemporary Indian theatre have had a “past” as addressing the difference between films and theatre. Theatre art are not the packed articles like films, it remains unaffected in different situations and scenarios and hence, challenges the idea of “retrospective”.

If we throw light on playwrights, the chronology of work offers a synoptic view which clearly shows great variations in the works of individual authors. For example, one of the starkest differences could be highlighted between the work of Dharamveer Bharati, who produced only one full length play in his career, or Mohan Rakesh who produced three plays and a playwright Vijay Tendulkar who produced thirty-one on the other hand. Another aspect that we need to investigate in the context of contemporary modern Indian theatre was the relationship between drama, theatre, and culture of print, as not all the works that were created were meant to be published at that point of time. The differential relations that existed between media of print and performances played a vital role for existence of plays and performances texts. Such connections remain special in the cases such of Badal Sircar who moved deliberately from literary drama to performance-oriented theatre in his career. Perhaps the most important relationship in respect to playwright and directors remains between location, language, and theatre practices, for instance, some directors like Shombhu Mitra, Arvind Deshpande, and K.V. Subbanna maintained a strong connection with a single city or region or theatre group or language just the way Ruskin Bond did with Dehradun. On the other hand, people like Ebrahim Alkazi, Habib Tanvir and B.V. Karanth were geographically mobile, maintained multiple association and worked in several languages.

The mechanism in which playwrights and directors became available to audiences in different region and languages and remained central to working of multilingual tradition offered concrete rather than abstract evidence of existence of “national theatre”. Other features of post-independence period included broader materials and socio-cultural contexts in which plays were received. While the audience for theatre in India is small and everywhere metropolitan cities like Calcutta and Bombay has their own different experience and culture of spectatorship and even the central capital city of Delhi, they all differed from the small cities and their experience of theatre such as Bangalore, Madras, Pune and Bhopal and more isolated locations included areas such as Imphal and Heggodu.

In present day scenario as well, theatre is competing with all the popular mass-culture and media including television, video, music, radio which has aggregated the audience in India among the largest in the world and therefore, materially and economically the consumption also differs, and the definition of post-independence Indian theatre remains as a historically demarcated field.

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