

RITUAL IN THEATRE: VARIED MEANINGS

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Abstract

The present paper deals with the semiotic study of the rituals in Bharat Muni's Natyasastra. Natyasastra offers a plethora of rituals while constructing the natyamandap (theatre house). Natyasastra is the only ancient text that prescribes a scientific detail of the theatre architecture which stands authentic and meaningful in modern era as well when one considers its audio-visual aspect. The rituals are not merely the religious or seasonal ceremonies but an exploration of the hierarchical society prevalent in ancient India. The rituals are the signifiers referring to certain signified. These rituals are the social codes which highlight the place of theatre and its importance in ancient times in India. The rituals are the hallmarks that authenticate the religious nature of Indian drama. The Indian drama emphasises on the performance text mainly which is a modern phenomenon in contemporary theatrical studies. Through rituals one can decode the socio-cultural structure of ancient Hindu society.

Keywords: *Natyasastra, Rituals, Semiotics, Social Hierarchy, Natyamandap and Actor etc.*

Theatre in India and especially in *Natyasastra* is ritualistic and rituals are integral part of the construction of the *natyamandapa* (theatre house). The English word "ritual" owes its derivation to Latin word "ritus", means custom. Rituals are themselves performative and down the ages, they have been embedded in theatre. It is well said, "Ritual, an integral component of Indian life, contains the seed of theatre. Ritual is sacred theatre and theatre is secular ritual" (Editor's Note in Shivprakash).

Rituals are the root of theatre throughout the world. All the primitive cultures were

religious in nature and god fearing as man did not comprehend the logical aspect of natural calamities, and to escape from the malevolent forces of nature people used to observe certain rituals. These rituals were considered the direct offerings to the deity to whom they expected the protection from such disastrous acts.

In Indian theatre, especially depicted in *Natyasastra*, the rituals occur even before the construction of the playhouse, during the construction, prior to the performance, in the *nepthya* (tiring room), and during the performance. When an actor reaches the stage he/she touches the stage, an indication of showing respect to the profession. It is common in India, not only in theatre but even the players touch the playground as they enter the ground. According to Farley Richmond these rituals occur in the opening and ending mainly though the whole performance is replete with rituals. Frederique Max Muller was among the early theorists who attempted to unravel the nature of myths and rituals. For him, myths and rituals were among the early poetic statements of ancient Indo-Europeans dedicated to sun and other gods, later misunderstood as metaphysical events by people they conquered. Later Andrew Lang Edward and B. Tyler challenged/resented this theory of max Muller to establish that myths and rituals were not misunderstood but were deliberate attempts on behalf of these people to explain the mysteries of the world. Both above mentioned thinkers consider rituals and myths to be “an interesting product of human mind” and “and a ‘primitive’ way of reasoning.”

There may be a grain of truth in the analysis of Andrew Lang Edward and B. Tyler. Rituals seem to be a conscious attempt on behalf of ancient religions to convey certain messages to one generation to another. It seems plausible that rituals came into existence to unravel some mysteries of creation, to understand and reconcile with the forces of nature. Most rituals of the times were to propitiate the gods and goddesses to protect them from the fury of nature like thunderstorms, hail, squalls, scorching sun, etc. at that time science had still not resolved all the mysteries of nature and neither could man understand or control these powerful natural elements. Farley et. al. rightly points out, “The occasion of a ritual performance may be either seasonal or yearly festival propitiating the deity, or a specially commissioned ritual performance fulfilling a vow or seeking a boon for a family or an individual” (Farley et. al. 121-122).

In a Nietzschean way, it is indicative of 'will to power'. Human beings are weak against nature and basically because of this weakness and ignorance of the ways nature, primitive man tried to control nature through rituals. In such societies, theatre and rituals were used by men to propitiate the forces of nature, which in essence meant, they tried to control the natural forces for material prosperity and security. In the primitive societies, one particularly interesting use of theatre was to frighten the men, women and children, to promote reverence for gods. *Natyasastra* clearly warns man to be quite vigilant and careful as *Bharat* warns in chapter third *Pujavidhanam* (Puja to the Gods of the Stage), "But when the auditorium is not consecrated in proper manner it will be indifferently helped by gods, and there will be an end of the dramatic spectacle, and it will likewise bring evil to the king" (NS 54-55). It is a good example to see how people were interpellated by religious ideologies through theatre.

Emile Durkheim exploits the function and the instant impression of rituals on the mind of an observer. He focuses on the pragmatic utility of rituals in the general social structures. Rituals are rules and conduct to instruct people how they should behave in the presence of sacred objects and these rules are not to be deviated. From a Foucauldian perspective, it can be said that rituals prepare a person to be obedient to society and its hierarchies to ensure its proper functioning. Foucault argues in his *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of Prison* (1975), that discipline creates 'docile bodies', ideal for the new economics, politics and warfare of the modern industrial age. But, to construct 'docile bodies' the disciplinary institutions have to observe and record the bodies they control constantly; and to ensure the internalisation of the disciplinary individuality within the bodies being controlled. Analysing from a different angle rituals are also a religious process creating 'docile bodies' though the socio-political and cultural conditions of modern industrial age are totally different that of from the primitive societies.

Redcliff Brown and Eliade exploit the structural analogy between rituals and language. For them, a linguistic morpheme (the smallest unit of meaningful word) is similar to the smallest unit of structural unit of meaning of a ritual like a set routine of action (like preparing the place of rituals). If conceived in wholeness, rituals have their own system and structure according to which a set or part of rituals communicate. Malinowski belongs to the segment of the scholars who are concerned the pragmatic aspects of rituals. He says that

rituals are directed to an aim or a desired object. For him, ritual work according to a structure in which texts contexts play a coordinate role.

Rituals in Hinduism mark the journey of a person from one phase of life to the other as Hinduism prescribes rituals, for every phase of life, from birth to childhood through marriage and finally death. It is also fascinating that the earliest ritual known to man is related to death. These rituals do not mark of different phases of life but attune one to play a particular role in the society. Thus rituals correspond to social structures because through them an individual is transformed and put into a web of relationship. The prescribed *ashram vayvastha* (this system demarcates the life of an individual into four *ashramas* – *Brahmcharya*, *Grahyasth*, *Vanprasth* and *Samyas* respectively) in ancient Hindu society that declares the responsibility of an individual towards the society and the family is a clear indication of above mentioned point.

The *solah samskaras* (sixteen *samskaras* of Hinduism) are a good example of how the realisation of change and growth happens through these rituals. It gives access to a Hindu to some special traditions and systems those are closed for him before a *samaskara*. Marriage is a ritual that allows you to have sensual pleasure as it is forbidden before marriage in ancient Hindu society. It is a journey from one state of life to another.

Rituals are performative in nature and they have an intrinsic element of action. In fact, the element of theatre might be first demonstrated by rituals. Rituals are a set of religious or mythical rules observed and performed publically to achieve certain objectives. The rituals, in ancient times, were performed where gods and humans understand the responsibility to maintain the order and harmony in the world and the cosmos. Hence, there was an affinity of purpose between drama and rituals in ancient India as both were performed to either appease gods, supernatural powers and ancestral spirits or to impart cultural or spiritual values to generations.

The performance in ancient India were mainly festival base, but not mandatory as that of Greek tradition and some performances other than calendar base festivals, and these festivals were calendar based. Thus at the initial level it works as a substructure of a larger socio-religious structures. According to the *Natyasastara* itself the first play, *Amrtamanthana*, was performed by *Bharat* on the occasion of 'banner festival of *Indra*'.

These festivals were most of the time religious in nature. Even the harvest festivals are addressed to a god or a natural phenomenon. The *Vedic* literature presents certain instances where certain events organized to appease gods, ancestors and seasons. *Yajnas* were performed to offer the gods a share of the crop, ghee and milk. Fire god Agni is considered the purohit (priest) who takes these offerings to the desired destination. Festival ritual is popular in India and has a close connection with performance too.

Rituals are the integral constitutive element of drama in Indian tradition and *Natyasastra* prescribes a very well ordered set pattern for these rituals. *Bharat's* emphasis on the method of *puja* and other offerings establishes the status of drama in Indian tradition besides it the semiotic analysis of these rituals unveil the cultural codes of Indian society in ancient times.

The process of the construction of the playhouse itself is full of symbolic rituals which require careful observation. The sacredness and sanctity of the dramatic space and performance are the topmost priorities. In the Indian thought system, dramatic performance connects the temporal and the spiritual; it is both human and divine. It, therefore, foregrounds an integration of the ritual, as a sign as well as an object, and its relationship with the human interpreter.

The theatre is consecrated like a temple and many rituals are performed which connects the profane space with the sacred one. The rituals performed while constructing the playhouse especially in second chapter foreground the hierarchical nature of Indian society. The first and most common ritual is to clean oneself before any ceremony. This cleanliness indicates that one should be free from all the impurities whether physical or mental. It is quite common to take a bath before any kind of *puja* (worship) in Hinduism. "Since they are most often performed within a religious context, they require ritual cleanliness and other devotional observances" (Richmond 124).

The sprinkling of holy water, highly symbolical, helps the doer to be mentally sound and concentrated on the project. *Ganga Jal* (holy water of Ganga) is sprinkled on such ritualistic occasions. *Ganga* is acknowledged as the most reverend river and it is hailed as mother. Its origin is divine and it has close association with *Lord Shiva*. There is a prescribed asterism for each architectural construction. The ground should be measured under the

asterism *Pusya (Cancri)*, the foundation should take place under the asterism *Mula (Lambda-Scorpionis)*, and for construction of pillars *Rohini (Aldeberan)* and *Sravana (Aquillae)* are the auspicious asterism. It explicates the importance of the astrology in architecture in ancient India. One cannot build a pious structure without consulting the auspicious time and *tithi* (date).

Brahmins and cows are auspicious and sacred for the Hindus and their presence even before the commencement of the play house reflects the sacred character of the dramatic space. Cow is called *go-mata* (mother cow) by the Hindus and it is believed to be symbol of nurture. Cow is a symbol for divine energy and the feminine power. Cow represents non-violence and its milk is sacred and is considered to be purifying element. In the *Vedas* the word *goes* has dual meanings; cow and light.

The offerings, food stuff, colours are cultural codes embodying the social structure. The food offering is significant to highlight the social hierarchy. The offerings at time of foundation exhibit the social order. The offering of food stuff tells the social status of the person. The dramatic master should observe three days fast. Fasting is a spiritual activity in Hindu culture and the number three has symbolic significance.

The construction of pillars is highly pregnant with cultural codes. Their very order verifies the *Varna* system prevalent in ancient times. *Brahmin* is at the top and the *Sudra* at bottom whereas *Kastriya* and *Vaisya* stand at number two and three respectively, so is the order of pillars. In case of *Brahmin* pillar a cow should be offered as *dakshina* (gift). The offering should be white, and white is symbol of purity and so is *Brahmin*. *Payasa*, the most acknowledged food is offered and a piece of gold is prescribed for the foundation pit. The nature of offering signifies the position of *Brahmins* in ancient Hindu society. The offerings prescribed for the *Kastriya* pillar are of second rank. Rice mixed with molasses is offered to twice born caste and a piece of copper should be put into the pit. During the *Vaisya* pillar *Brahmins* should be offered rice with ghee and piece of silver should be place in the pit. During the construction of *Sudra* pillar the twice born caste should be fed with *karsars*, the lowest in the order of mentioned food items. Hence, the selection of offerings is a chart displaying the social hierarchy of ancient Indian society.

In the verses 1-8 of the third chapter in *Natyasastra*, *Bharat* asks to make *Brahmins*

and cows dwell for seven days in the theatre house. *Bharat* asks these *Brahmins* to mutter *mantras* while being there in the theatre house. The word *mantra* comes from *man*, means 'think' and *tra* is related to instrumentality like *yantra*. Collectively, the word suggests 'instrument to think' as its meaning. It is clear that the *mantras* are a part of a speculative knowledge tradition. This speculative tradition has its roots in spirituality because the *mantras* are believed to be directly coming from god's mouth. *Mantras* are thought as the combination of spiritual syllables and a source of energy. According to *Upnishads*, *mantras* were always there in the *prama akasa*, (sky) primeval ether out of which the universe is created. These *mantras* were already perceived by the ancient *rishis*. Later they were transformed by the *rishis* into rhythms, forms and words. Another definition of the word *mantra* is that *man* means to think and *yantra* means 'to protect or to liberate from the *samsara*' (the world). It means *mantras* are the thoughts that protect and liberate an individual.

Even today people think that the chanting of *mantras* in proper way drives the forces away, that's why on all auspicious occasions the *homa* is performed. Still people go the temple for curing the diseases and get rid of the evil forces. Even such rituals are observed by the topmost scientific institute such as ISRO at the time of launching a new satellite. Hence chanting of *mantra* is an old tradition and has significance in this modern era as well.

The *natyamandapa* (playhouse) came into existence due to obstruction created by the *daityas* (evil spirits), hence it requires the divine protection. The dramatic master invokes the gods to take their position to protect the art from evil.

The master of the dramatic art is supposed to be the main performer of the consecration rituals simply because the most experienced person in any clan or family usually performs rituals. The rest of the people automatically become obedient to the master of the dramatic art. This master of the dramatic art is never an ordinary person but someone who has subdued his senses and rich in the dramatic art. He is the main performer because the dramatic action and performativity are his main occupations. It is a kind of hegemonic process or the interpellation that makes the persons involved serious towards his occupation/duty.

Jarjara is the symbol of royal patronage, the protection of the art and the destroyer of the interceptors. *Indra* is the king of gods and the protector of the dramatic art against all the

obstacles. The *Natyasastra* mentions him as the most powerful figure. But the dramatic art is not just about the other world or gods and *daityas*. It is meant for mortals, especially to teach those values and morals. The myth of the origin of *natya* (drama) makes it clear.

The next step in theatre consecration is the installation of gods in which the *achamana* is performed. *Achamana* is sipping water three times, repeating the names of the lord. This is for internal as well as external purity. While sipping water, some *mantras* are muttered touching the various parts of the body, viz., the eyes, the ears, the face, the navel, the head, etc. One becomes pure by doing *achamana* after he answers the calls of nature, after walking in the streets, just before taking food, and after a bath. This serves as a reminder of the deity one reveres.

During the installation of the gods, certain items are used like red bangles, red sandal, red flavours, red fruits, barley, white mustard, shunned rice etc. As earlier mentioned in the first chapter of this work, red signifies courage and valour. Here red signifies the function of these gods in theatre house, and their function is to protect the art hence, valour and courage is required. The offerings to the gods in the third chapter are largely in the order *Brahma* describes them. Thus, even the gods are assigned function in theatre house. Once again spiritual and material needs of the human beings are combined to bring about stability and prosperity to men as well as to the dramatic art. Here the gods are present on the stage symbolically and no idol is used.

The above mentioned rituals are performed in the empty *nataymandap* (playhouse), means before the performance. In Indian tradition the *purvaranga* (preliminaries to the play) plays a significant role. There are total nineteen *purvarangas* (preliminaries of play), nine are performed behind the *yavnika* (curtain) and ten after removing the *yavnika*. Dhruva songs are performed to please the gods. *Raksasas*, when hear the *dhruvas* for gods, become angry and are pacified and pleased with the performance of *Nirgita*. Here, the performance of *Dhruva* and *Nirgita* signifies the balance and democratic aspect of *natya* where all are welcomed irrespective to their all external identities. It is noteworthy here that the *Daityas* and *Raksasas* are doubtful towards their representation in *natya* from the beginning and they reported it to Lord *Brahma* blaming him for favouring the gods only. But Lord *Brahma* counselled them and instructed them about the objective of drama clearly, "I have prepared this *Natyaveda*

which will determine the good luck or ill luck of you as well as of the gods, and which will take into accounts acts and ideas of you as well as of gods. In it (*natya*) there is no exclusive representation of you or the gods: for the dramas a representation of the States (*bhavanukirtana*) of the three worlds” (NS 17).

The ritualistic offerings to the gods are capable to explicate the nature of the concerned and his/her position in divine order. Like the society of profanes there is a hierarchy in celestial region as well. Hindu tradition does not approve any prejudice against the lower strata whether the profane or divine as the *natya* (drama) is concerned. The *Natyaveda* is available to all irrespective *varnas*. Here not only the *devas* (gods) are worshiped but the *Raksasas* as well. This *natya* is the symbol of wholeness and integrity. Verse 88 mentions the *homa*, an auspicious ceremony where the priests chant the holy mantras and offer the *ahuti* in the holy *agni* (fire). It is believed that these fire offerings reach to the gods one is invoking. The *Homa* is a common auspicious ceremony in Hindu religion which is observed at various occasions such as the *muharta* (inauguration), birth of a baby etc.

In verse 87-89, the breaking of the jar ceremony is described by *Bharat*. It is linked directly to the future of the king and the dramatic art. It seems to be a ritual influencing people's psyche. In this ritual, the jar used, is made of clay and most of the time and there are high possibilities of its breaking into pieces. When broken it satisfies the ego of the people involved in it. *Bharat* says that if it is broken, the enemies of the king will meet their destruction. “In case the jar remains unbroken the king (lit. the master) will have a cause of fear from enemies; but when it is broken his enemies will meet with their destruction” (NS 53-54). Here, it clearly is an ego satisfaction ritual. During the primitive age people used to perform ceremonies before wars. In these ceremonies they used to perform the motion of combat and act out the killing and torturing of their enemies in vivid details. The purpose of these performances cannot be terroisation because they are performed in the absence of their enemies. Clearly, they are for self-excitation or self-exhortation. Once again it is clearly an attempt to overcome fear through imagination.

After breaking the jar he, noisily, covers the theatre house with a lamp or light, while jumping and running about, which is considered a pious activity in Hindu philosophy. Lamp is the symbol of purity and knowledge that removes the darkness of ignorance. When *Lord*

Rama returns to *Ayodhya* after killing *Ravana* people light the lamps in the honour their king. In this perspective lamp is a symbol of reverence as well. Before the commencement of any stage performance, today also, the dignitaries light a holy lamp before *Ma Saraswati* who is the goddess of knowledge.

Theatre house is like a school wherein the mission to eradicate ignorance is carried out. In this ritual also, the master illuminates the stage with the light of knowledge. It creates a complete spectacle in which all people involved feel victorious over ignorance. Rituals provide a magical touch to them. The performers expect something magical in their favour. In such a situation, the person repeating the myth becomes a super figure. C.G. Jung comments about this close relationship between magic and ritual, “The idea absurd to us, that a ritual can magically affect the sun is, upon closer examination, no less than irrational but far more familiar to us than might at first be assumed” (Jung in Kurtiz 6).

Rituals in themselves are sacred theatre to invoke certain kinds of emotions or in the context of *Natyasastra* they prepare the spectator for a real theatrical performance. But whatever the performance is, the rituals before a performance and during the construction of the theatre house defines the nature of the dramatic art in Indian tradition. The rituals connects the playhouse with that of the temple. The sacredness of the place plays an important role in guiding the spectators’ cognition and perception. It remains in the mind as an impression to perceive a performance in certain way and avoid other.

Significantly, in India, the dramatic art is a constructive action that brings about explicit as well as implicit as well as moral changes. And these changes are purely ethical and at times aesthetic. Durgadas Mukhopadhaya mentions that the objective of *natya* is not merely the entertainment but the amalgam of metaphysics and spiritual. “The pleasure of drama is not mere sensuous pleasure confined to the material world. It is a transcendental experience in its highest sense, which liberates rather than enslaves the body and the soul” (Mukopadhayay 243).

Thus to borrow an expression from Thomas Hardy, rituals are performed to assign roles in the general drama of life. They have their significance in the context of the theatre house where aesthetics, spirituality and delight meet. Rituals in India are a complete aesthetic experience. All the sense organs including the faculty of imagination are engaged in a

spectacle during these rituals. The rituals performed in the *natyamandap* (playhouse) are cultural vehicles carrying the socio-cultural imprints directly associated with the life the Hindus in ancient times. These rituals, all, have not lost in oblivion but still practiced in modern Hindu society that helps one to decode the ritual codes prevalent in *Bharat Muni's Natyasastra*. There can be no better place than the theatre house to produce such multileveled structures of meaning through rituals.

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