

NATYASHASTRA AND ITS MUSIC

Saish Deshpande
Research Scholar,
Department of Music & Dramatics
Shivaji University, Kolhapur
saishpd@gmail.com
&
Prof. Dr. Rajan Gavas
Former Head - Department of Marathi
Shivaji University, Kolhapur
&
Dr. Prabhanjan Mane
Associate Professor - Department of English,
Shivaji University, Kolhapur

Abstract

Classical Indian theatre incorporates the conventional method of theatre performance as propagated by sage Bharata in the Natyashastra. The treatise of Indian dramaturgy covers all of the aspects related to drama production and performance. Indian theatre performance is an amalgamation of literature and music. Natyashastra regards the act of play presentation as something to be seen (drishya) as well as heard (shravya). The metered poetry of classical Indian scripts has an inherent rhythm in its structure and hence needs to be addressed musically. Classical Indian dramas based on the conventions of the Natyashastra are full of descriptive verses, dramatic action along with songs and dances wherein, 'Music' becomes an inevitable component. Sage Bharata has explained the concept of Swar, Shruti, Jaati, Laya, Taal, while also describing various types of instruments to be used during a performance to enhance its theatricality. This paper briefly reviews the importance of music as propagated in the Natyashastra.

Keywords: Bharata, Natyashastra, Theatre, Music, India, Drama

1. Introduction

Theatre in India and its sub-continent had attained a classical stature with a variety of theatrical forms being performed. Sage Bharata compiled all the information that would make various types of dramas successful. *Natyashastra* – the science of dramaturgy – is considered

to be the earliest of such compendiums on theatrical activity. It was compiled sometime during 2nd century BCE to 2nd century CE by sage Bharata along with his 100 disciples.

The title is made of two separate Sanskrit words, *Natya* (drama) and *Shastra* (science or treatise). The text consists of 36 chapters with a collective total of 6000 sutras or poetic verses written in Sanskrit. The compilation incorporates within itself, earlier texts on dance, music, drama and memorable expressions of performing principles probably handed down by tradition from generations of *Nat* – actors or theatre practitioners.

According to V.Raghavan, sage Bharata conceived drama as an integrated art of music, dance, action and poetry. The word '*Natya*' means and comprises both dance (accompanied by music) and drama⁰¹.

The term '*Natya*' as per the *shastra* propogates as well as incorporates the application of music during a drama performance for,

- a) Singing,
- b) Dancing,
- c) Instrumental and percussive support to recitation and
- d) Accentuation of the defined movement patterns and the emotional essence of scenes.

In the treatise, sage Bharata has abbreviated all the main elements required to make a play performance complete and music has been placed at the core of it.

In the 6th chapter, while explaining the *Natyang* (elements of play), he mentions eleven such components essential for an aesthetically gratifying presentation. Among these eleven, he includes *Swar* (musical note) *Atodya* (instrumental music) and *Gana* (song).

In other words, musicality is an indispensable *Natyang* of the plays performed by the conventions of *Natyashastra*.

2. Music Component

After *Samaveda*, the next authentic reference for music is the *Natyashastra*. It is the oldest and probably the first detailed exposition defining the theory of Indian Music as an art form. The seven chapters from 28 to 34 are the most methodical source of information on music conceptualised in the sub-continent. Several theoretical aspects fundamental to the grammar of cultivated music have been documented through these seven chapters and also in chapter 5, which is on the preliminaries.

As expressed by G.H.Ranade, Sage Bharata gives a clear, detailed account of the *Swaras* - musical notes, of the *Shrutis* – the microtonal intervals between the successive degrees of the scale, of the two *Gramas* – parent scales and the *Murchanas* – scales obtained by transposition⁰².

Dr Brijvallabh Mishra while writing about Natyashastra observes that of the seven chapters dedicated to music and musical instruments, chapter 28 entitled *Atodya Vidhaan* defines the *Gandharva Vidya* (knowledge of music) and illustrates the four categories of musical instruments. The next one titled *Ras Jaati Laxan* explains types of vocal renditions, their use and the method of fine-tuning musical instruments. The 30th chapter, *Susheer* covers wind instruments while *Taaladhyay*, the 31st explains various rhythmic patterns (*taal*) and the importance of tempo (*laya*). The 32nd chapter, *Dhruva* (songs) elaborates the need of melodic phrases and situations when they are to be sung. In the 33rd *aadhyay*, sage Bharata elucidates the qualities of singers and accompanists required to enhance the dramatic effect and finally *Pushkaradhyay*, the 34th chapter describes the use of covered percussion instruments⁰³.

The classical Indian drama performance is principally an audio-visual spectacle. The script makes use of poetry meters, the *MatraVrittas*. The inherent rhythm in the language of the text was an aesthetical demand of the classical style. Use of poetry elevates the spectator and imparts an emotionally fulfilling experience. Such poetic expression demands an equally competent verbal expression for reciting in a suitable rhythmic pattern. Natyashastra suggests that poetry should also be rendered through a melody phrase called the *Dhruva*. Use of rhythmic accompaniment and melody instruments was thus a necessity as well as an integrated part of the form.

So as to make the music refined and classically cultivated, Natyashastra propagates the concept of a proper music discipline. Sage Bharata thus conceptualises and explains in the 28th chapter, terms such as,

- a) *Murchhna* (scales) which form the origin of today's *Thaat* system.
- b) *Jaati* (modes) of 18 types which are the basis of modern melodic structures known as *Raag*.
- c) The use of *Shruti* (smallest gradation of pitch).
- d) importance of *Swara* (note in selected pitch) and their combinations.
- e) *Vaadi* (primary note), *Samvaadi* (sub-sonant note), *Vivadi* (dissonant note) and *Anuvadi* (assonant or attendant note).

Sage Bharata also gives details of the effect of *Swara* combination through various modes and its subsequent arousal of a particular *Rasa* (sentiment). The conventional dramatic representation, *Natyadharmi* necessitates characteristics of *Nritya* and hand gestures. This non-realistic approach to *Abhinay* (acting) makes musical accompaniment an essential component of the structure.

The nature of the music discussed in the treatise could be divided into three broad heads for a better understanding. They are,

- a) Vocal music

- b) Instrumental music,
- c) Accompanying music

2.1. Vocal music

Vocal or verbal music has been given great importance by sage Bharata. Apart from the prayers, *Naandi* and the *Bharatvakyam* that are to be sung in chorus, *Natyashastra* expresses the need of solo songs termed by him as *Pada* to be interspersed in a performance. These also include songs other than those composed by the poet but based on *Chhanda* (verse or meter). These are divided into two categories,

- a) *Nibaddha* (composed with *Taal*) and
- b) *Anibaddha* (more like an *Alap* or ‘*ad libitum*’).

Songs composed in *Laya* (tempo) and *Varna* (arrangement of notes in successive order) are called *Geeti* of which, *Dhruva Geeti* is of more importance as it has a perfect balance of *Swara*, *Pada*, and *Taal* and hence named *Dhruva* meaning progression. If sage Bharata conceptualised such intricate theories regarding vocal music, he certainly did not expect the art of singing to be limited to the preliminaries or occasionally during the performance.

Dhruvas (translated as ‘lyrics to be sung’), are a definite group of words composed specially for the purpose of singing. These *dhruvas* used as a vocal form of music were a necessity and were sung either in,

- a) Chorus, (during prayers, *naandi* and *bharatvakyam*),
- b) Solos (short songs related to the action sung by the actors as characters) and,
- c) Songs that are sung during the scene or as an interlude by specialised singers seated with the musicians.

Kamal Abhyankar is of the opinion that all of the *dhruvas* were not planned and composed by the playwright or the poet. These songs also served as a device used by the actors during the performance. Some would be composed by the actors as the character whilst some by the singers as an additional comment on the scene. These would be visually supported by a dance performance but short in nature⁰⁴.

The songs (*dhruvas*) were a musical device used by the poet so also by the *sutradhaar* to support the story and by the actors to convey their characters more convincingly.

Verse 6.10 of the *Natyashastra*, defines five kinds of such *dhruvas* (songs). They are,

1. *Pravesa* (entering) songs to indicate introduction,
2. *Aksepa* (casual) songs to indicate unexpected or interposed happening,
3. *Niskrama* (going out) songs to indicate leaving or exit,
4. *Prasadika* (pleasing) songs to indicate content or happiness and

5. *Antara* (intermediate) songs for filling the gap ⁰⁵.

Such a design certainly requires an equally qualified musical support. Apt use of *dhruvas* during the interludes is a convention that binds the poet as well as the performer. The intricate description certainly denotes that Natyashastra expects much more from the art of singing and songs were a requisite in the production and the overall structure of a play.

2.2. Instrumental music

Natyashastra emphasizes on the use of musical instruments throughout the drama presentation. The principles of various stylised gaits for characters to be portrayed according to their characteristics, age, and emotional state necessarily was to be (and most certainly were) augmented by rhythm and melody performed along with the visual representation. Chapter 28, which is on *Atodya* (instrumental music), describes four types of regular musical instruments used during a play performance.

The four groups are based on their acoustic principle and described as,

- a) '*Tantu*' or '*Tata*' (string instruments).
- b) '*Susheer*' (hollow or wind-blown instruments).
- c) '*Ghana*' (metal instruments) and
- d) '*Avanaddha*' (instruments covered with skin or membrane) ⁰⁶.

Of these four, *Tantu* and *Avanaddha* are to lead the composition while *Susheer* and *Ghana* support them. Natyashastra mentions that in the *swara* segment, *Veena* is the main instrument, while the *taal* section is lead by *Mridanga*.

The 29th chapter of the Natyashastra is entirely devoted to explaining the principles of playing the stringed instruments, especially the *Veena* while the 30th chapter describes the method of playing a wind instrument like the flute. Natyashastra also propagates the use of percussion instruments to enhance the scene being acted out. Chapter 33 instructs about the specific rules for playing the *Avanaddha*. Twelve technical nuances are also explained by sage Bharata regarding the application of fingers, the technique of playing two-faced skin instruments and the tonal quality expected during a play performance.

Instrumental music thus is meant to widen the adequacy of the vocal rendition. Sage Bharata advocates the use of *Tantu* and *Susheer* (as in *Veena* and *Flute*) to improve the quality of singing to which *Avanaddha* group provides the beats while *Ghana* group provides the side rhythm. Natyashastra thus promotes the appropriate use of instrumental music to cover the flaws of the singers if any.

2.3. Accompanying music

Sage Bharata asserts that *Rasagrahan* (appreciation and gratification) of drama performance is enriched with the support of various musical compositions that are to be arranged parallel to the performance. The existence of such a system can be deduced from *shlokas* 8 – 11 of the 5th chapter which speak about nine kinds of introductory songs to be sung behind a curtain as part of the preliminaries with the playing of drums and stringed instruments.

The same chapter 5 also speaks about three such preliminaries to be performed after the curtain departs. They are, *Pratyahara* meaning arranging of the musical instruments in the orchestra, *Avatarana* where the singers arrive and take their positions followed by *Margasarita* which is playing together of drums and string instruments in harmony with one another. This denotes that sage Bharata presumes the musicians to be seated on stage during the entire performance in full view of the spectators. This seating arrangement of musicians to provide background music and orchestral compositions is termed by him as *Kutapa*.

As V.Raghavan puts it, the poetic form of the text which was also a part of the *natyadharmi* – stylised action – was further assisted by the art of music, both vocal and instrumental. An elaborate orchestra sat behind, and the strings and the drums accentuated the moods and the feelings ⁷.

Chapter 33 (*Avanaddha*) of the *Natyashastra* emphasizes the concept of a disciplined *Kutapa* (orchestra). This, it states should ideally have one male and one female singer with nine to eleven musical instruments. The musicians as accompanists are to perform as a team. This accompanying music fulfils the requirement of,

- a) Songs and non-lyrical vocal phrases sung by singers,
- b) Rhythmic support to action and also to entries and exits,
- c) Instrumental melody phrases with or without rhythmic support played during the scene and as interludes.

In order to achieve this, Bharata also suggests three groups (*kutapa*) of music-performers,

- a) *Tata-kutapa* (the vocalists, the players of string instruments, and the flutists),
- b) *Avanaddha-kutapa* (players of percussion instruments such as Mrudanga, Panava and Dardura),
- c) *Natyakarta-kutapa* (actors and actresses of the play).

The orchestra consisting of string, wind, percussion and side rhythm section is to be arranged at the upper area of the stage (*RangaShirsha*). This theory seems equivalent to the concept of background music design albeit performed live.

3. Conclusion

Music in the Natyashastra serves as an effective necessity to impart luminosity to the play text and helps in its stylisation. As per the compendium, Music and Play production are inseparable. Based on the information available, inferences that can be drawn are,

- 1) The element of 'Music' has been given prominence in Natyashastra.
- 2) The grammar of music was well established during the period of Natyashastra. The actors, as well as the audience, were well versed with the classical music system.
- 3) Stylised movements that were a part of the presentation were performed with rhythmic and melodic support.
- 4) The poet would compose special verses that were meant to be sung by the characters with the musical accompaniment from the onstage musicians
- 5) All of the poetic verses were not meant to be sung albeit delivered rhythmically.
- 6) *Naandi* at the beginning and *Bharatvakya*m at the end were musical conventions that were a part of the classical theatre form. They were sung by the entire troupe.
- 7) Songs were a device used by the poet to develop the story and carry the dramatic component forward. It also helped in characterisation.
- 8) Music was a part of the drama presentation from the preliminaries until the commendation at the end.
- 9) New varieties of instruments being developed or the tones that are being generated can be categorised to the four types of musical instruments as defined in the Natyashastra.

It can be concluded that Sage Bharata designed and propagated the principles of 'Music' through the Natyashastra and expressed them in the form of aphorisms. They were tried and tested for different types of theatrical activity existing in the sub-continent then. The *sutras* that he designed for structuring melody and rhythm have laid the foundation of Indian classical music of today. It is interesting to note that all of the melodic progressions, all of the rhythmic time frames existing today, have been discussed and formulated in the Natyashastra. Sage Bharata through the treatise still serves as a pioneer and a guide to the music researchers of today.

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