

BHARATA  
The Nāṭyaśāstra

KAPILA VATSYAYAN

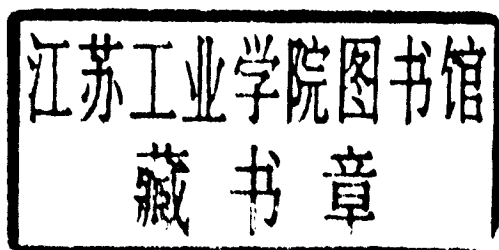


Sahitya Akademi

# BHARATA

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SAHITYA AKADEMI

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### *Head Office*

Rabindra Bhawan, 35, Ferozeshah Road, New Delhi-110 001

### *Sales Office*

Swati, Mandir Marg, New Delhi-110 001

### *Regional Offices*

172, Mumbai Marathi Grantha Sangrahalaya Marg, Dadar,  
Mumbai-400 014

Central College Campus, Dr. B.R. Ambedkar Veedhi, Bangalore-560 001

Jeevan Tara Building, 4th Floor, 23-A/44X, Diamond Harbour Road,  
Kolkata-700 053

### *Chennai Office*

Main Guna Building Complex (second floor) 443(304), Anna Salai,  
Teynampet, Chennai-600 018

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First published: 1996

Reprinted: 2001, 2003, 2005, 2007

Price: Rs. 150

ISBN: 81-260-1808-9

E-mail: [sahityaakademisales@vsnl.net](mailto:sahityaakademisales@vsnl.net)

Website: <http://www.sahitya-akademi.gov.in>

Printed at: Swastic Offset, Naveen Shahdara, Delhi-110032

## Introduction

To be asked by the Sahitya Akademi to write a book on Bharata in the Biography series is a rare honour, little deserved. Had the great savants, the late Professor S.K. De, Dr Manomohan Ghosh, Dr V. Raghavan, even the late Professor K.J. Shah been alive, it would have been their prerogative. Amongst my peers and contemporaries there are Professor G.K. Krishnamoorthy, Professor G.K. Bhatt, Professor G.H. Tarlekar, Professor Kamalesh Datta Tripathi, Dr Premlata Sharma, Dr Mukund Lath and others who have spent many years of their life studying the one and only text attributed to Bharata. All of them would have been eminently suitable and far more erudite and competent.

Thus, despite the full consciousness of inadequacy, I accepted the invitation as a student of the text and its contents because it gave me the rare opportunity to ask seminal questions on the broader issues of the textual tradition in India and to re-examine this fundamental text from the point of view of vision, context, structure and process. Also, instead of a descriptive chronological account of either the author or the work, I have chosen the more hazardous path of re-investigating the methodological tools so far adopted by scholars for a critical examination of the textual tradition in general and the history of

aesthetics and art criticism in particular. Consequently, the short monograph is neither a recapitulation of the histories of Sanskrit literature nor a summary of the technicalities of each of the concerns of the *Nāṭyaśāstra*, e.g. the origin of drama, the construction of the theatre, the four *abhinayas*, and the exposition of the theory of *rasa* first articulated by Bharata.

Instead, my attempt has been to re-view the *Nāṭyaśāstra* as an important confluence in the perennial flow of the tradition with the twin processes of continuity and change, as also of the interplay of the *śāstra* and the *prayoga*, not to speak of the integral vision which provides a unity of purpose and rigorousness of structure to the text.

An attempt has been made to place the text in the context of the flow of the *paramparā* rather than to locate it in a particular period and specific place. The text encapsulates a discourse in diverse disciplines and in turn stimulates further discourse in a variety of disciplines. The intrinsic multi-disciplinary nature of the text has been generally accepted but a closer examination of the system has so far not been attempted. Understandably, while some scholars have examined the chapters on aesthetics (*rasa* and *bhāva*) others have concentrated either on the chapters relating to the construction of the theatre or music or dance (including me in my previous work). Here an attempt has been made to look at the text in its totality and its well laid-out system of connections and interconnections of the parts and the whole. I hope the book will help scholars to understand the structure as also the 'systems'.

The text has a long and complex history of commentaries, interpretations, as also multiple streams of texts in the different arts which flowed out of the *Nāṭyaśāstra*. In this field also, although there has been a distinguished

history of scholarship in the field of literature, particularly poetics, dramaturgy, music and dance, the dialogue between and amongst them, viewing them as emerging from a single source has been an exception rather than a rule. I have attempted to indicate the paths and tools of this dialogue in what may be called the post-Bharata period.

To encompass the history of the commentators and interpreters, the makers of aesthetic theories, in a short monograph was a daunting task. It could not be excluded because the discourse illuminates the text and reveals the nature of discourse within the tradition. A careful selection with acute discrimination of what I considered to be principal rather than secondary has been made. Naturally this has resulted in being not all 'inclusive'. The aim was to highlight the manner and nature and intellectual tools of the discourse rather than the details of the content of particular works.

Logically, this should have been extended to the interpreters of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, i.e. critical scholarship from Regnaud to Oldenburg, Keith, Indu Shekhar, Raghavan, Masson, Christopher Byrsky and Patwardhan and others. On second thought, I decided to exclude this because no re-assessment of this history can be made without addressing issues of Orientalist discourse. This will have to be another book.

Despite its exclusion, I hope there is material here for some hitherto not so well-known information and enough stimulation to ask questions on the proverbial problems of authorship, the relationship of the oral and the written, context, text, the implicit and explicit text, and the history of discourse, not only in relation to the *Nāṭyaśāstra* but also other texts of the tradition. The relevance of these questions in the light of the contemporary debate on what constitutes a text is all too evident and needs no comment.

If further questionings arise on reading this book my task is done.

I would like to thank the Sahitya Akademi for asking me to write. I would like to acknowledge my debt to the scholars mentioned above, particularly the late Dr M.M. Ghosh, Dr Raghavan, as also Professor K.D. Tripathi for the stimulation he has provided through his lectures and many personal discussions. Dr Irene Winter, Chairperson of the Department of Art History, Harvard University, Cambridge, Mass., USA, facilitated access to the Widner Library. She and her husband, Professor Robert Hunt, not only provided space for writing much of the book but also provided the opportunity for many thought-provoking discussions on categories. These enabled me to ask unconventional questions in the context of the *Nāṭyaśāstra*. I would like to thank them. Professor B.N. Saraswati read the manuscript and his responses were most beneficial. Professor Indra Nath Choudhury and Dr Ranjit Saha have been most gracious and understanding. I thank Shri K.D. Khanna and Shri Pawan Kalia for their invaluable assistance in typing. I am grateful to my colleague Sri Satkari Mukhopadhyaya for seeing the second page proofs.

*New Delhi*  
*July 1995*

KAPILA VATSYAYAN

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# 1

## BHARATA

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### The Question of Authorship

For the Sahitya Akademi, to choose Bharata in the 'Biography' series is as natural, almost overdue, as it is problematic and complex. The unique and undisputable importance of the *Nāṭyaśāstra* is universally accepted. Of the author, little is known. Thus, the very first issue one faces is that of the identity of the author, and that of the date or period of composition of the *Nāṭyaśāstra*.

Before proceeding to investigate who the author was, or what this historical or mythical author created, wrote or compiled, and when he did so, it would be pertinent to address the more general question of why nothing or so little is known of many Indian authors, writers, theoreticians, and of course, artists. That a culture which developed a massive macro and micro classificatory system, which had a well laid-out scheme for lineage, geneologies, schools of teaching, location and social class and caste with a remarkable penchant for categorization of pan-Indian, regional and local identities, should falter, slur over, even make secret or obliterate, the personal accounts of many authors and writers, provides a valuable clue to a deep and fundamental aspect of the culture. It points at a special approach to the work of art, its creators, as also its

theoreticians. For us today the whole notion of self-identity surfaces for discussion.

Few details are known of the personal history of Vyāsa, Vālmiki, or for that matter, Kālidāsa, not to speak of the countless conceivers and builders of temples, creators of sculpture, painting, music and dance. No doubt, some among them speak about themselves, situate themselves within the lineage of their predecessors and contemporaries, and others do not. But the fact remains that personal histories are of little value, both to the authors and their critics. Coomaraswamy had spoken of the tradition of anonymity—a self-conscious transcendence from self-identity. Of late, this has been seriously questioned as scholars have found names and inscriptions on temples and sculptures, mason marks, and even signatures on paintings. Despite the discovery of these inscriptions and signatures and some details of personal lives it would be valid to ask the question, whether or not the artist/theoretician was providing inadequate information by 'volition', 'design' or 'accident' outside the work of art and none or very little of course within the work of art, other than occasionally revealing his identity.

It would appear that for the 'creator' as also the 'theoretician', the identity of 'self' as individuality, 'I-ness' as assertion of position, or point of view, that is unique, distinct, and largely in confrontation with the immediately preceding or the contemporary, was not a psychical issue. The moment of 'creation' and 'reflection', of deducing a theory or evolving a set of principles, could have been possible only after the subjective individual 'self' and 'identity' had transcended to a higher level of harmony and equilibrium, or had enlarged itself to a larger wider 'self' where principles could be evolved and universals

extrapolated or explicated. Impersonalization or depersonalization was its first demand.

One can continue to discuss the perennial problems of dating and exact locations, even the historicity of many authors, writers and theoreticians. So far, a few have attributed this lack of information to the proverbial lack of a sense of history in India. Also, much time and effort has been spent in establishing chronologies, suggesting tentative dates and bringing in external and internal evidence for identifying a particular date. We believe that the near pan-India phenomenon is an indicator of a deep and fundamental world-view rather than either carelessness or casualness. Recent scholarship on Indian history has pertinently questioned the judgement of India's proverbial lack of a sense of history and time and has brought to focus the necessity of distinguishing between the notion of history and that of both *purāṇa* and *itihāsa* (so it happens). Some arguments in that context are even more relevant in the sphere of the arts.

Literary criticism and Indian art history have examined the notion of 'space' and 'time' and of place and time in relation to the work of art, poem, drama, monumental architecture, sculpture, painting, music or dance, but have not acknowledged that an alternate notion of 'space' and 'time' and that of another 'self-identity' (which, in fact, is trans-individual identity) are inter-related and intertwined. If the work of art and theoretical proposition are 'trans-self' and not individual personal-self, and if archetypes and universals are being evolved or deduced, then, while it would be important to situate oneself in a lineage of predecessors, contemporaries and even successors in the matter of 'thought', theoretical position, schools and styles, it would not be important to date oneself in mere

historical time or locate oneself in a particular place, or to pay attention to dating his or her work in terms of only calendar linear time. It is true that inscriptions on temples and sculptures, colophons on manuscripts and dates on paintings provide most valuable data on time, date and place. However, at no time is all this data an indicator of the author's or theoretician's personal-self or 'I-self'. His search is not for the new unique self; instead, it is for submerging himself in a perennial flow. Invariably, he does not claim novelty or uniqueness. If and when self-consciously he identifies himself, it is only in order to situate or contextualize himself in an ongoing discourse which is larger than himself. The distinction is a fine, but important one. Also, while the information (data) on time and place except in the case of monumental architecture provides valuable material for location and date of execution, it does not follow that the date of the colophon of the manuscript or the date even on a painting or sculpture is the same as that of the composition of the work of art. In short, while details of time and place are clues for execution, they are of little avail in a critical assessment of the particular work in relation to the larger and broader river or stream of the tradition. Within this tradition, individual or group styles and schools of thought can no doubt be discerned, but again, this is not to be equated with the assertion of a unique individual-self.

A related issue is that of orality in respect of verbal texts. The text may or may not be contemporaneous with the written manuscript or text. The most outstanding case is that of the Vedic texts and their written manuscripts. Examples can be multiplied manifold in many other disciplines as also in the creative and critical arts.

It is important and necessary to make explicit these issues in the context of Indian culture in general, but

especially the literary, visual and performative arts. The application of inappropriate yardsticks for comprehending a tradition has sometimes caused confusion and misconception. Undoubtedly, much time and energy **has been spent** on trying to 'locate', 'place' and 'date' individual authors and creators in a linear order of time and calendar and to place them in a particular 'space' and 'locale'. As a result, often, 'where' and 'when' have been the end of the investigation rather than the 'what' and 'why' of the text, work of art, or theory. Perhaps the situation can be explained through an 'analogy'. The questions asked are: by whom, when and where did the creation take place? Further, at which particular spot in the Ganga did the creation take place, if it happened in an ever-flowing river, rather than which stream flowed in or flowed out of the Ganga resulting in confluences or divergences. The human instrumentality was, no doubt, important, but in sum was an integral part of the dynamics of the nature of the flow and the course of the river. It would be more appropriate to speak of the proverbial continuity and change, and the distinctive dynamics of the Indian tradition rather than its lack of a sense of history.

These preliminary remarks will perhaps make it clear that while the exploration of the identity, date and personal history of Bharata the individual—man or woman, his/her personal life, would be an interesting course to take, it would not reveal or make manifest anything of crucial and basic importance in regard to the theory of aesthetics which was articulated or propounded in the one and only (so far acknowledged) text attributed to him, namely, the *Nāṭyaśāstra*. Our focus of attention has thus necessarily been on this seminal text, which is the first enunciation of an Indian theory of aesthetics, rather than on the person or the personal history of its author.

Bharata. Nevertheless, it would be useful to pause briefly to consider the many hypotheses which have been put forth in regard to the identity of the person Bharata.

To the question, who was Bharata and when did he live, if he did live, many answers have been suggested. There is a history of a hundred years or more of scholarship which has in part or full concentrated on the identity of Bharata the person, his possible historicity, whether or not he represented a single person or a school of thought or a group of scholars, and whether the word 'Bharata' is only an acronym or eponymous for the three syllables *Bha* (*bhāva*), *Ra* (*rāga*), *Ta* (*tāla*). Some also hold the view that the *Nāṭyaśāstra* is not the work of a single author, not even of a group of authors or a school of thought. Instead, they believe that the different chapters of the book were written by different people over a period of time. Arguments and counter-arguments have been put forth for defending each of these positions. Without going into the history of these discussions by Macdonnel,<sup>1</sup> Keith,<sup>2</sup> Konow,<sup>3</sup> M. Ramakrishna Kavi,<sup>4</sup> S.K. De,<sup>5</sup> Manomohan Ghosh,<sup>6</sup> K.C. Pandey,<sup>7</sup> F.B.J. Kuiper<sup>8</sup> and many others,<sup>9</sup> it is necessary to point out that a close reading of the text makes it clear that the work reflects a unity of purpose and that it was the product of a single integrated vision, perhaps also of a single author. There are complexities, but no contradictions. Many subjects dealt with in the earlier chapters can only be understood by the perusal of later chapters and vice versa. Indeed, the author claims at many places that a particular sub-theme will be dealt with later, or that the chapters which come early in the sequence are in fact a condensation of details discussed later. The most obvious case is that of Chapters III and V where many technical terms of music and musical structure are mentioned. Their meaning and elaboration are con-

tained in many later chapters where single components of sound, music, musical instruments, structure and composition are elaborated upon. The same is true of Chapter IV, known as *Tāṇḍavalakṣaṇam* which deals with the cadence of movement, called *karaṇas* and longer sequences, called *aṅgahāras*. None of the descriptions can be understood without the aid of Chapters VIII, IX and X, which deal with the macro and micro movements of the body—in short, all that Bharata recognizes as the larger rubric of *āṅgikābhinaya*. Many other instances convince one of the coherent and organically well-knit structure of the work. It could not have been the work of several authors over a long period of time. This will be obvious when the structure of the *Nāṭyaśāstra* is analysed.

Whether Bharata was a historical person or whether the author gave himself the name Bharata is a question more difficult to answer. If the work is an organic whole reflecting a single vision it would follow that the writer was a historical person who by volition made no attempt to reveal his personal identity because he believed that he represented and shared a school of thought. He was investigating a field; he was developing a theory within a larger history of discourse and laying out the broad parameters, rather than stating an individual or personal position. Logically, the mode of presentation is one of a dialogue between Bharata and sages. It is the inquiry into the nature of drama that unfolds the origin, theory and technique of drama and theatre with all its components of speech, word, body-language, gesture, costuming, décor and the inner states or temperaments. Judging from the above, it would be reasonable to assume that whoever Bharata was, he did belong to a community of artists, actors, dancers, poets, musicians, who shared a world-view—a mythology, was conversant with a textual tradition

of the Vedas and was acquainted with and adept in actual performance and practice. How else would one understand a text couched in a language of mythology with repeated references to Vedic texts and rituals or *yajna*, as also to performance rites, *pūjas* ?

Nonetheless, from the text of the *Nāṭyaśāstra* we do learn something about the author as also his larger immediate artistic family of a hundred sons, if not biological descendants. The *Nāṭyaśāstra* begins by a salutation to Pitāmaha (Brahman) and Maheśvara (Śiva)—a rare combination, and attributes all that is to follow on the *śāstra* of *nāṭya* to Brahman. The sages (*muni*) approach Bharata, the master of *nāṭya* (drama), and ask him, 'How did the *Nāṭyaveda* originate? For whom is it meant?' It is in reply to this question that Bharata first insists on a state of preparedness. The listeners must be cleansed and attentive before he begins his discourse. The status of 'authority' and 'teacher' is obvious. Later, after he has told them of Brahman's state of *yoga*, his concentration and determination (*saṅkalpa*) to create a fifth Veda, the question arises of passing it on. It is here that Bharata uses the singular and says, Brahman said to me, 'O, the sinless one, you, with your hundred sons, will have to put it (the *Nāṭyaveda*) to use.'

'Thus ordered I learnt the *Nāṭyaveda* from Brahman and made my able sons study it as also learn its proper application' (I.24-25). Then follows a list of his hundred sons which includes names which have been identified with contemporary or later authors, specially Kohala, Dattila, Taṇḍu, Śālikarṇa. etc. This story and the listing has been the subject of some discussion in regard to identity. However, the basic information we receive from this narration is that Bharata was indeed the teacher and preceptor of a school or academy with pupils or sons, and



that each of these may have been both performers and theoreticians. Bharata assigns different roles to each of the sons and thereafter the play begins.

We need not delve further into the presentation of the first play on the occasion of Indra's banner festival, but should turn our attention to the very last chapter of the *Nāṭyaśāstra* which tells us something of great significance about the group of actors (sons, pupils), if not the theoreticians.

In the last chapter of the *Nāṭyaśāstra* the author provides a definition of the appellation Bharata: 'As he alone conducts as the leader of a performance by acting in many roles and playing many instruments by providing many accessories he is called Bharata' (XXXV.91). Scholars have tried to deduce from this that the word 'Bharata' seems to denote a class of ballad singers who were perhaps precursors of drama and theatre. The *paripālavas* may well have been precursors of the actors. However, at this stage the various hypotheses need not detain us. It is only important to note here that Bharata's emphasis is on the ability of those who are called Bharatas to take on many roles and to be the vehicle of presenting and evoking *rasa* (sentiment), *sthāyi bhāva* (dominant emotive states), *vyabhi-cāri bhāvas* (transitory or transferable stages), etc. They are not just taking on roles; they are the instrumentalities of conveying and communicating intangible but real states of mind. The demand for impersonalization as also for discipline is inherent, as is obvious from what happens a little later in Chapter XXXV and the very last, Chapter XXXVI. These sons of Bharata obviously misuse their skills and capacities to ridicule the *muni* (sages). As a result they are cursed: 'as due to pride in your knowledge (*jñāna*) you have taken to arrogance (*avinaya*), your ill knowledge (*kujñāna*) will be destroyed.' Further, 'in the community