

Varna System and *Nāṭyaśāstra*: Caste-based Discrimination in the Art Explanation of *Nāṭyaśāstra*

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Abstract

Nāṭyaśāstra, composed by Bharat Muni, is one of the oldest literatures of Indian art and culture which contains the explanation of dance, music, drama and other artistic performances. According to scholars the composition era of this script can be held from 200BC to 200 AD. Bharat says- since *Nāṭyaśāstra* has been composed out of four Vedas (*Rigveda*, *Samaveda*, *Yajurveda* and *Atharvaveda*), it has been named as the fifth Veda. The explanation of Varna system gets its place in this literature along with the explanation of various arts. Moreover, this script establishes Varna ideology and superstitious activities. This book on dramaturgy despises women, physically disabled persons, Buddhist monk (*Bhikkhu*), *Sudras* and persons from lower rung of society. I will explain here some couplets of *Nāṭyaśāstra* with the conceptual framework of Dalit discourse.

Keywords: *Nāṭyaśāstra*, Varna System, Brahmanical ideology, Hierarchy, Power and Discrimination.

The first chapter of *Nāṭyaśāstra* deals with answering questions regarding the origin of *Nāṭyaśāstra*, for whom it was created, what are main elements, what are the ways to achieve it and how it can be adopted posed by Aatreya and other disciples. Bharat Muni answers-

Get yourselves cleansed, be attentive and hear about the origin of the *Natyaveda* devised by Brahman. O brahmins, in the day of yore when the golden age (*Satyayuga*) passed with the reing of *Svaayambhuva* (*Manu*), and the silver age (*Tretaayuga*) commenced with the career of *Vaivasvata Manu*, and people became addicted to sensual pleasures (lit.: *Gramyadharmā*), were under the sway of desire and greed, became infatuated with jealousy and anger sorrow, and *Jambudvip* protected by the *Lokapaalas* (guardians of the worlds) was full of gods, *Danavas*, *Gandharvas*, *yakshas*, *Rakshasas*, and great *Uragas* (*Nagas*), the gods with *Indra* (*Mahendra*) as their head, (approached) Brahman and spoke to him, please give us something which would not only teach us but be pleasing both to eyes and ears. (True) the Vedas are there but (Some like) the *Sudras* are prohibited from listening to (learning from) them. Why not create for us a fifth Veda which

would be accessible to all the *Varana-s* (castes)? (*Bharata*, 2012, p. 2-3)

Meaning- *Tretayuga* of *Vaivast Manu* started with the end of *Swayambhu Manu's Satyayuga*. People were practicing rural religion and were indulged in greed and satisfying their bodily needs. They were going astray due to jealousy and anger. Then, Lord *Indra* and other gods told godfather *Brahma* that they needed such an entertainment which was audiovisual. Since Vedas teachings could not be given to *Sudras*, creation of a new fifth Veda was requested meant for all sections of Varna system.

Two important things can be discerned from this shloka-first *Nāṭyaśāstra* has been meant for all sections of Varna system. The very fact that this text has been written in Sanskrit, put a question mark on its applicability to all sections. *Sudras* - the lowest stratum of Varna system – were prohibited to get any form of education. The education system, which is an important part of public and collective life, was filled with discrimination based on caste and class. *R. K. Mukherji* says- "It is clearly articulated in religious text that only upper three sections of the Varna system – *Brahmin*, *Kshatriya* and *Vaishya* – are eligible to get education." *Nāṭyaśāstra* could have been meant for all sections, had it been created in *Prakrit* or any

contemporary ordinary language. Which is not done, and Brahma have given this *Nāṭyaśāstra* to Bharat Muni how's knows Sanskrit and other Vedas, to teach his on disciple in his school (Aashrama). Here it is clear that through this art what they are going to perform or teach to the Shudra.

Second important thing is that here is mention of a word called *rural religion* (Gramyadharm) the meaning of which has been constructed as sensual deviation. Abhinav Gupta translates this word in this way-*"this is such a religion which is prevalent in uneducated people and where their religion is not practiced"*. Actually, 'religion is not practiced' mines the people who are not living according to Brahminical culture and who are not doing their duties properly which were decided by Brahminical system. It is implied in this is that Shloka the medium of art was used for entertainment purpose along with dissemination and instillation of religion. The lower section of society belonged to suppressed class. Jain and Buddhist religions were gaining in prominence at that time. *"All the religious practices of Buddhist religion were different. Not only the doors of Buddhist monastery were open to all regardless of their caste, but also their discussions were more inclusive and contained subjects of practicality and interest"* (Romila, Thapar, 1989). The labor and minority class did not separate from it (Brahmanical system). The medium of art was used as a means to disseminate Brahmanical culture in Aryan and other non-Aryan states. Samuel Fleischacker (2013) says:

The liberal state represents itself as concerned to protect, equally, the interests of every person in its domain, but it does that only in a very abstract way (by, for instance, laws that on their face, but not in practice, help everyone equally) and in fact is the expression of a particular ruling class, rather than of the people as a whole. (p. 84)

Nāṭyaśāstra was made for all persons equally. However, upper section remained domineering here also which is represented in many lessons of *Nāṭyaśāstra*. The primary elements of drama have been recognized as Natyagrah (Auditorium) in the second lesson of *Nāṭyaśāstra*. The provision of alms and other ritual

functions while getting constructed Natyagrah and prescription of various kinds, shapes and rituals of Natyagrah – failing to which might not augur well – perpetuate the ongoing benefit to a particular section of the society. Even the splitting of string which was to measure the land was related to the bad omen. If land measurement process goes very well, it was suggested to *"feed Brahmins in terms of meal and donation"* (Bharata, 2012, p. 22-26). In another Shloka is written that-

Wise people should prepare for this purpose string which is not liable to break. When the string is broken into two (pieces) the patron (potentate) will surely die. When it is broken into three a political disorder will occur in the land, and it being broken into four pieces the master of the dramatic art will perish, while if the string slips out of the hand some other kind of loss will be the result. (Bharata, 2012, p. 22)

This Shloka of *Nāṭyaśāstra* that given any discrepancy in rituals, potentate of that state not the guru may pass away. Actors and gurus were afraid of the punishment meted out to them in place of loss of potentate more than their own. Therefore, they were not able to resist it. In this context, *Nāṭyaśāstra* is seen as a means to nourish the Brahminical tradition and superstitious practices.

The construction of pillars in the Natyagraha was discriminatory. These pillars used to be as a demarcation among four rungs of Varna system. It was the provision that the pillars made for Brahmins should be made of precious *sandalwood* and pillars for other sections could be made of any wood. All kinds of alms and donation – clothes, cow, gems and delicious food – were given to Brahmins only. Further Bharata has suggested that-

First of all, in case of the Brahmin pillar, white garlands and unguent as well as gold from an ear-ornament should be thrown at its foot, while copper, silver, and iron are respectively to be thrown at the feet of the Kshatriya, Vaisya and Shudra pillars. Beside this, gold should be thrown at the feet of the rest (of pillar). (Bharata, 2012, p. 25)

Here by making this kind of rules and rituals compulsory, mandatory and rigid regarding the formation

of Nāṭyagraha (Auditorium) especially for the sitting arrangement. It is apparent that one group of people will have treated in very sophisticated and prestigious manner and for other group of people will something ells. It shows that *Nāṭyaśāstra* has meant to maintain hierarchy among the people by dividing audience place from gold and sandalwood of pillar, not to create equality. This hierarchy is nothing but Varna system.

In this same chapter Bharta says *"From the places for the ceremony, undesirable persons such as heretics (pashand), including Sramanas, men in dark red (kashaya-vasana) robes as well as men with physical defects, should be turned out."* (Bharata, p. 23). According to this Shloka that, during the lay for auditorium in that place should not come any Pashand, Ascetic (sanyasi), Kashaya-Vastrdhari and physical challenge people. If they present then they should take away from that place. According to Manmohan Ghosh as he translated Pashand the *"word meant simply a 'community' and not a heretical community"* and *"Sramana means Jain monks"* and *"Kashaya-Vasana men in kasaya or robe of dark red colour; such people being Buddhist monks who accepted the vow of celibacy, were considered an evil omen, for they symbolized unproductivity and want of wordly success etc"*. For these people *Nāṭyaśāstra* consider as a virulence for this occasion. Why they consider as virulence of these people Because, Jainism and Buddhism ideology are different or against to the Brahminical ideology or system. and the 'Pashand' by the word of heretic which is translation of Manmohan Ghosh and according to Babul Shukl Shastri, Pashand means Vidharmi (schismatic) a person who holds unorthodox opinions in any field (not merely religion). Means they are not ready to see that person who is denying or not following their ideology and tradition. But what about physical challenge people? These people already suffering from their physical condition and Bharata is increasing their problem through the society by the creating this kind of inhuman thought and this superstition are coming from thousands year back which is spread by Brahminical system or ideology, which is very bad for humanity. Now also some people are conceding

we should not see like that person (physical handicap) in the morning and any debut of special occasion.

Similarly, they are defined in *Nāṭyaśāstra* as inferiors, creed and despised sects. Regarding the people who differs in ideology or philosophy Manu-smriti has strictly said that,

All those traditions (Smriti) and those despicable systems of philosophy, which are not based on the Veda, produce no reward after death; for they are declared to be founded on Darkness. All those (doctrines), differing from the (Veda), which spring up and (soon) perish, are worthless and false, because they are of modern date. (Manu-smriti, Chapter 12. 96-97, p. 394).

According to Manu all other practices which differ from Brahminical set up such as Buddhism, Jainism, Pashupat sect, Charvak sect are inferiors. *Nāṭyaśāstra* mentions the same as these religions, creeds, sects were Veda cynic and detractor of Vedas. Not only this, they were strongly opposing Vedic, Varnic and Brahmanic rituals.

The language used by characters and the ways of address from one character to another were also discriminated on the basis of varna system. The eighteenth lesson of *Nāṭyaśāstra* contains the provision of language for drama where Sanskrit has been considered as Arya language, Atibhasha and the language of God. Whereas Prakrit language has been relegated to Apbhransh, Vibhasha and the language of Sudras. Relegated secondary status was given to *Shakri, Shabri, Aabhiri and Chandali*, and other regional languages of Prakrita such as *Ardha-magdhi, Shourseni, Prachya, Avantija, Balhik and Dakshinatya*.

These languages have been treated as caste language. Dr. Vishwambhar Nath Upadhyaya says that *"in context of language, Nāṭyaśāstrais casteist and Varnic"*. There is the provision of usage of Sanskrit for characters from upper class and Prakrit for characters from lower section. Sanskrit was prohibited to Shudras. Even the female characters were strictly advised to use Prakrit only with the exception of usage of Sanskrit in special circumstances.

In this shloka-

For the pleasure of all kind of people, and in connation with the practice of arts, the courtesans are to be assigned Sanskrit recitation which can be easily managed.

For learning the practice of arts and for amusing the king the female artist has been prescribed to us Sanskrit in dramatic works.(Bharata, 2012, p. 328)

And it advises that also for the entertainment, pleasure and amusing the king and all kind of audience (Rasik) Sanskrit language should used by Maharani, courtesan and female artist (servant character).

The lesson of Nineteen, its talk about Different modes of address. Brahman characters can address to anyone even Kings with their own word-choice- *Brahmins may address the kings at their pleasure, by their names. This should be tolerated, for the Brahmins are to be adored by the kings.* (Bharata, 2012, p.334). Kings should be addressed with their name or other words convenient to Brahmins and the usage of bare name or plain words would be forgiven by the kings as worship to Brahmins. Not only for the king for any person who is belongs to three Varna system. In this chapter shlokas are about how to address the people with their Varna, clan (Gottra), caste, class gender and profession hierarchy. And through the concept of language and by the presentation of drama what they want to teach or which kind of behavior they want to create among the people? It's very clear, through this they are teaching how to talk with our king and other people with their social hierarchy by the Brahmin and how to behave by the language with lower cast or working class through the Brahmin and non-Brahmin people. Second hand king and his minister should not behave any kind of brutally form with the Brahmin, and same time they are feeding their culture, life system and behavior to the people who is not belongs to Brahminical culture and life system. *Nāṭyaśāstra* advises Sanskrit language for the script and character language. But, this language not only language any form of education was restricted for the Shudra and lower class not only in drama in real life also, so they can't understand this language, it's very clear *Nāṭyaśāstra* had made for only upper section from the

Varna system. But Shudras and working class were also audience of this kind of performance because this rule and regulation followed by not only court drama group but also that group which were might working in the kingdom. When this *Nāṭyaśāstra* is so discriminatory on the basis of language, how can it be meant for all sections of Varna system. Lower section, Shudras and women whose status was similar to Shudra were prohibited from using Sanskrit. In order to maintain the hierarchic supremacy of the upper Varna, *Nāṭyaśāstra* has done linguistic politics and suggested that the Sanskrit language should be given to hero and those who are belongs to the highborn castes not to the lowest cast.

In the Thirty-four-chapter *Nāṭyaśāstra* is describes types of characters. it says-

The Hero is described as being of four kinds: the self-controlled and vehement (Dhirodhata), the self-controlled and light-hearted (Dhiralita), the self-controlled and exalted (Dhirodatta) and the self-controlled and calm (Dhira-prashanta).

Gods are the self-controlled and vehement (Dhirodhata), king are the self-controlled and light-hearted (Dhirodatta), and Brahmins and merchants (Vaishya) are the self-controlled and calm (Dhiraprashanta) classes of heroes. Corresponding these are the four kinds of jesters (Vidushaka). They are Sannyasins (for gods), Brahmin (for Kings), other twice-born castes (for ministers) and disciples (for merchants and Brahmins) (Bharata, Vol. II, 2012, p. 201-203).

According to this Shloka and according to the Brahminical ideology all good habits and good principled (Good Character or Charitravan) is available only in gods, king, Brahmin and Vaishya varna. So, these people are only eligible for Hero character and also these varna people can be Jesters (Vidushaka). And there is provision of employing only Brahmin characters or characters from upper class in the stories of metaphors (Dasharupakas). In the lesson number 20 which contains the explanation of ten metaphors (Dasharupaka). No characters from lower rungs can be employed. Given the discrimination of characters on the basis of caste, class, and Varna.

Conclusion

So, with these racial and Varnic ideologies, the question arises that how *Nāṭyaśāstra* can be equally applicable for all four Varna. Especially for the Shudra Varna, for whom Indra and other deities has requested, it seems they are just creating a notion that they are thinking to improvement of the labor class or showing as well-wisher for them. But actually, it is not the fact in relation to the creation of *Nāṭyaśāstra*. *Nāṭyaśāstra* is trying to improve the acceptance of the hierarchy of Brahmins, their superiority, race, culture and their hegemonic system. As Gramsci delineates that the culturally diverse society can be ruled by one of its dominant social classes. It is the dominance of one social group over another in order to exercises power and authority. The dominant elite class's ideology becomes the norms of the society and further those norms benefit only to elite group but not to the others particularly subaltern class. All the group of people consider ideas of dominant class as universal in nature.

Nāṭyaśāstra seems to have been establishing the dignity and greatness of upper sections and their religious practices. And by the applying these rule and regulation and through the performance it is insisting Brahmanical

ideology, superstition, Varna system, cultural practice and superiority of upper caste.

Referencea

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