

Bharat Muni's Natyamandapa: A Semiotic Study

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Abstract

The present paper is an attempt and to decode the signs bearing the cultural implications used by Bharat Muni in his drama manual the *Natyasastra* when he depicts the architecture of the second chapter of the *Natyasastra*. Besides that it also explores Semiotics as a theory and Indian contribution in the same discipline. The *natyamandap* (Theatre House) of Bharat Muni is a sign in itself that unfolds the layers of hierarchy of ancient Indian society. The present article deals with the architecture of the *natyamandap* (Theatre House) mainly.

Keywords: Natyasastra, Natyamandap, Semiotics, Bharat Muni, Pillars.

India has a rich and vast heritage in the form of art and literature that has created a system of thought for the proper dissemination of meaning. The knowledge system of Indian classical art and literature was a part of oral culture therefore, it was important for the texts to have a proper inbuilt system to exist historically in the minds and the memory of people. Such knowledge systems were primarily modelled on the linguistic system that sought to establish the varied layers of signification between word and meaning, the object and what it stood for or in the semiotic sense the signifier and the signified.

. The present article seeks to analyse the signifying structures embedded in the ancient Indian discourse on the *natyamandapa* (theatre house) especially as depicted by *Bharat Muni* in his drama manual entitled the *Natyasastra*, the oldest treatise on drama, music and dance. The *Natyamandapa* (theatre house) in *Bharat Muni's Natyashastra* is a text in itself, an architect, that explicates the value of theatre and drama in Indian ancient life

Although semiotics as an independent theory came into existence with Ferdinand de Saussure (1857 - 1913) and C.S. Pierce (1839 - 1914) and popularized only in the second half of twentieth century. 'Semiotics' as a term was first used by Margrate Mead, an anthropologist, in 1962 in a conference. "It was at the 1962 Conference on Paralinguistics and Kinesics at Indiana University that the anthropologist Margrate Mead introduced the English word 'semiotics' for a method to cover 'all

patterned communication in all modalities” (Sebok61). If one talks about the semiotics and Indian tradition one can easily find that the major issues of modern semiotics and modern linguistics were discussed and exploited by ancient Indian scholars like Panini, Bhartrhari and Patanjali. In Indian ancient scholars almost the same issues were dealt but there was no such independent discipline of thought as Kapil Kapoor and S.N. Srivastvasaid:

It is true that formal categories of modern semiotic speculations such as ‘sign’, ‘structure’, ‘signification’, ‘communication’, ‘information’, and the like (Bouissac) do not find an independent, specific discussion as parts of a ‘semiotic’ discipline in the classical Indian theories; but it is equally true that these concepts are available in literature pertaining to philosophy of grammar and language, and that a parallel set of terminological contrivances handle virtually the same data. (Sebok220)

Now the modern scholars of science also have acknowledged that the Indian grammatical tradition was quite rich, varied and inspiring for modern linguistics. K. Kapoor and S.N. Srivastva accentuate:

Thus we see some of the major problems of modern semiotics have been at the centre of the philosophical and linguistic speculations in the Indian tradition, although an independent term was never used for this discipline and its principles were never explicitly formulated”. (Sebok)

The theory of semiotics later extended to many other disciplines also other than that of language and literature and theatre is one of the most crucial field. Some semioticians have the notion that the theatre has a language peculiar to itself but the Antonin Artaud like theatre scholars is not satisfied and seeks the help in Asian theatre or one can say the theatre developed in the East to form a complete syntax and semantic of theatrical language through the use of gestures to make the theatre more discursive. *Natysastra* offers six complete chapters entitled as *Uttamangabhinay* (Gestures of Minor Limbs), *Hasabhinay* (Gestures of Major Limbs), *Sharirabhinay* (Gestures of Other Limbs), *Charividhanam* (Cari Movements), *Mandlavikalpnam* (Movements of Mandala) and *Gatiprachar* (Movement of Gaits) where Bharat tells in detail how to use the different body parts to form a meaningful *mudra* (posture). All these chapters tell about the bodily gestures where the actor convey the messages through the symbolical gestural language that is highly semiotic. Julia Kriesteva opines, “... in trying to establish a non – linguistic model of gesture, that the relationship in which the subject, object, and ‘practice’ itself of the gesture are bound is, precisely, ‘of an indicative but non – signifying kind” (Elam 72).

Natysastra is made of two Sanskrit words one is *natya*(dramatic) and the second is the *sastra* (a discipline in a particular field of knowledge in Indian tradition).*Natysastra* is not merely a text but a knowledge tradition, and its significance can be measured as it derives its authentication from the Vedas and it is known as the fifth Veda as well as *Natyaveda*. The *Natysastra* narrates the divine theory of origin of drama where Lord Brahma created the fifth *Veda*, the *Natyaveda*, on the request of Indra, the king of gods, and he took the elements from all the four *Vedas* as Bharat Muni mentioned:

Natysastra is the gist of all the four Vedas as Bharat Muni said,

“The recitative part (*pathya*) he took from the Rigveda, the song (geet) from the *Samveda*, the histrionic representation (*abhinaya*) from the Yajurveda and sentiments (Rasa) from the Atharvaveda, and thus was created the *Natyaveda* connected with the Vedas’ principal and subsidiary (*vedopaveda*) by the holy Brahma who is omniscient. (N.S. 17-18) (04)

Natysastras not the only source exploits the existence of a *Natyamndpa* (theatre house) in ancient India. One can trace the mention of theatre house in the epic like the *Mahabharata* also where it is mentioned as *rangavata* that might be possibly used for archery competitions. There are some of some pavilions in cave sculptures like Rani Gumpu at Udaigiri and some sculpture are found in the caves of Ajanta, Bharhut, Sanchi and Amravati. Still no independent theatre house yet has been found like that of Greece. Though India had an ancient theatrical heritage as M.N. Ghosh says, “It cannot be said how far the ancient Indian plays were performed in specially constructed according theatre houses. It may be possible only kings and wealthy people owned playhouses constructed according to *Natysastra*“(NS xxxi).

The second chapter of *Natysastra* explores the structure of *natyamandpa* (theatre house) in detail and the process is quite semiotic as well as the components of *natyamandpa* are purely symbolic that lays down a very systematic portrayal of the hierarchy of ancient Indian society. The architectural design and rituals prescribed by Bharat Muni for the erection of *natyamandpa*, from *bhoomipujan* (worship before foundation) to the completion of its structure and even the performance. The Indian drama has a divine origin, it is customary in Indian tradition, so the creation of the *natyamandpa* is also divine and the god of architecture Lord Vishvakarma, on the request of Brahma, created the theatre house. Bharat Muni presented a play on the eve of Banner Festival based on the war taken place between ‘devas’ (gods) and *asuras* (evil spirits) where the *asuras* created the disturbance and then Lord Brahma requested Vishvakarma to build a beautiful *natyamandpa* (theatre

house) for the safe performance and certain gods and goddesses were deputed at different parts of *natyamandpa* for its safeguard.

In the second chapter of *Natysastra* entitled as *Mandapavidhanam*(Description of the Playhouse), Bharat Muni mentions the rules as prescribed in the *Sastras*, the complete body of knowledge produced in ancient India, for careful guidance to erect a theatre house. On surface the plan suggested by Bharat Muni seems quite simple. The prescribed architecture for *natyamandpa* is quite coterminous to the ancient building art. He suggested three types of *natyamandpas* (theatre houses) respectively as: *vikrasta* (oblong), *catursara*(square), *traysra*(triangle), divided on the basis of nature and the perceptive powers of humans as well as gods as perceived by him. This division is not a random or arbitrary one but by a conscious person highly experienced in both worldly wisdom and theatre tradition. The impact of cultural artefact seems quite visible in this architectural plan. Bharat Muni, being a worldly diligent, derives the merits and demerits of people from the entire knowledge tradition of India so that he can judge the traits of the people. The components of *natyamandpa* reflects the social and cultural convention of ancient India.

These three types of *natyamandpas* are further categorized into three sub categories *jyestha* (large), *madhya* (middle - sized) and *avra* (small) as per their size. This number three is not a coincidental choice or architectural need but it has a reason beyond its practical utility. The number three is quite significant in Indian knowledge tradition and has a far reaching implications. Tripartite is a common approach in Indian thought system to signify the mysterious world, where there is a significant interconnectedness among parts of this ultimate creative elements like:

- i) Sky, atmosphere, earth.
- ii) Past, present, future.
- iii) Object, medium, subject.
- iv) Sattva, rajas, tamas.
- v) Brahma, Vishnu, Mahesh (The Holy Trinity)
- vi) Swarga loka, mrittaloka, patalaloka etc.

The categorization of theatre houses is quite scientific and semiotic. Keeping the power of perception in view oblong theatre is prescribed for humans as Bharat Muni says, “An (oblong) playhouse meant for mortals should be made sixty four cubits in length and thirty two cubits in breadth” (NS 25). This size is scientific when one acknowledges the visual and acoustic capacity in view. This choice signifies understanding of human nature as well as the expertise of theatre of Bharat Muni.

Bharat Muni selects the piece of land for theatre house quite logically and seems very vigilant for even minor needs that shows the seriousness and dedication of Indians towards the art along with the accuracy the wise Sage is acknowledging for each and every step. The offering of *puja* (worship), that is mandatory step, signifies the Indian customary tradition and hierarchical social convention of India. One of the fundamental constitutive elements of playhouse is the land it is founded on. In India the land (*bhoomi*) is called as mother as it is the ultimate nurture providing from food to shelter. It is not only the productivity but the healing power of the mother earth that deserves love and affection from the people. In *Ayurveda*, different kinds of soils are prescribed as medicines for healing different ailments. The earth is one of the five constitutive elements of the creation. So Bharat Muni advises that the architect must examine the land before the erecting the theatre house. In a venture to establish a visible physical sign of the performing arts, everything matters to the minutest detail. For a durable building, the architect has to take everything into consideration, the soil, its condition and even its colours as Bharat Muni mentions it in detail.

The care taken in the measurement of the land for theatre house, the offerings to the Brahmins, the fast of the dramatic master signify that the dramatics in ancient India was not merely means of entertainment but a mode that leads one to *moksha* (salvation). The minor indifference of the architect may cause the great harm to the dramatic master or the kingdom again signifies that the construction of a playhouse was just like the construction of a temple.

The systematic plan of the construction of *natyamandpa* starts from the verse 33-35 in the second chapter of *Natysatra* and the plan is systematic and simple. The plan prescribed by Bharat Muni is the traditional residential architecture in India based on the *Vastu Sastra* and the *sastra* divides every architecture according to the *vastupurusa mandala*. Here, it is exclusively for the theatrical attainments that are the tight water tight divisions are permitted. As the plan proceeds, one can notice how the spatial arrangement is crucial in the dramatic discourse to denote and connote meanings. Evidently these parts play on the mind of the spectators and the performers. Besides creating parts is a way of semantics to both understand and create structures. The importance of division is greatly acknowledge by scholar like David Lidov in his book *Elements of Semiotics* (1991), where he mentions, “We distinguish parts from aspects, groups from classes, bounded units from contours. Parts may be distinct or indistinct, separated, conjunct, overlapping fully or partly or included one in another. (Lidov 132)

Then the wise sage advised to erect the four major pillars in the *natyamandpa* which symbolize the Hindu society in totality based on *varna* system. Here again the number four is quite symbolic and its

representation is significant in ancient Hindu society.

- 1) The four pillars represent the four varnas, the system depicted by Manu in his *Manusamriti*, named as *Brahmin*, *Kastriya*, *Vaisya* and *Sudra*, which makes the theatre house a complete sign of the functional/occupational classification of the society. These names are in social order. The theatre house signifies the democratic approach where all people could go. The rituals during the erection of pillars and their colours indicates the duties and their places in Indian ancient society.
- 2) The prime knowledge texts the *Vedas*, *Rigveda*, *Yajurveda*, *Samveda* and *Atharvaveda* are also four in number.
- 3) As per Indian Hindu philosophy there are four *purusarthas*(objectives of life), *dharma*, *artha*, *kama*, and *moksha*.

The life is divided into four *ashramas* as per Hindu philosophy. Other than the mentioned facts numerous other facts are also found in ancient Hindu social order.

The most discussed and complex component of Bharat Muni's *natymandpa* is *mattavarni* for which the different scholars have different opinion about the function of *mattavarnis* in theatre house. In case of *mattavarni* the offerings agreeable to *Bhutas* are prescribed in the text in the verse 65-67. It is interesting to quote M.L. Vardpande here who makes the case of the *Bhutas* explicit in his book *History of Indian Theatre*.

The well-known South Indian epic *Silapadhikarama* reflects very well belief of Dravidian people in *Bhuta* cult. It explicitly speaks of dramatic rituals associated with *Bhuta* worship that includes singing, dancing, and playing on the musical instruments. It is significant to note that in theatres printed pictures of the *Bhutas* were hung and worshipped. (Vardpande 45)

Bharat Muni prescribes two doors connecting the *nepthygraha*(green room) and the *rangamandpa*(performing area) used by the actors for entry and exit. This architectural plan must be contextualized to understand the theatrical events and communication. Here the *rangamandpa* symbolizes the birth through which we enter the world and the *nepthyagrha* denotes the death when we left the world. The stage is this universe where the characters lay their roles. The doors outrightly put an actor into the public sphere where he has to play a role. It also might be referred as that this enactment conceals the real self of a being. The theatrical universe is *maya* (illusion), restricted to physical and mental reality in which we are trapped. In this regard the *nepthyagrha* can be taken as the 'ultimate reality' that is beyond ordinary human perception, hidden behind the curtain of

ignorance. It may also refer the place where one is assigned various roles to play in the universe by the Almighty. With the new arrival a new scene is there.

There is another door specifically meant for the spectators. It functions like a transformative focal point as it includes a vast range of codes and sign system that demands an active participation of performer and the watcher. Theatrical communication takes place only when the spectator is involved in ongoing communication i.e. theatrical communication. Mostly plots were highly traditional and mythological in ancient Indian theatre that expects the proper dissemination of codes. It means the knowledge imparting system and the recipient must share some codes and these codes, sub codes and gestural expressions must be received in a proper set pattern to comprehend the inference in a proper sense. It becomes very essential in classical theater where the themes and plots were well known to spectators. In such a situation, the spectator has endless cultural associations with himself. If we talk about semiotic perspective, the socio cultural codes and signs interact with the theatrical codes to form a meaning generation process. It also signifies the structural approach where the things cannot be comprehended in isolation. In theatre even actor in himself is a complete phenomenon to generate the meaning.

Being the master of theatrical arts Bharat Muni deals with the dramatic in a scientific way where the acoustics and ventilation were highly acknowledged. Most of the performance used to take place during daytime and the artificial lighting and the electrical sound system was not there, keeping these things in the wise sage prescribed certain windows which must small place high in the walls which could serve the purpose of ventilation, lighting and echo. The great scholar of theatre Taral Mehta depicts the windows and ventilation system in the theatre house described by Bharat Muni:

Three kinds of windows are mentioned:

- (1) Variously placed small latticed or intricately banded windows at a higher point in the wall.
- (2) Interior windows.
- (3) Latticed ventilation on the theatre walls for the play house to be airy and ye sheltered and cave like. (Mehta 50)

The paintings on the walls and the pillars are also highly semiotic as the amorous and natural scenes are prescribed by Bharat Muni. The sitting arrangement was according to the *varna system* as is the case of pillars also. The sitting arrangement denotes social order and cultural hierarchy. The sitting arrangement denotes that Bharat Muni's theatre was a public theatre where anyone from any category could come and enjoy the performance.

The stage was divided into two parts one is *rangpitha* and *rangsirsath* that is again a point of debate. The presence and location of *kutupa* (musicians) is highly symbolic. The whole performance was controlled by the musicians and especially the drummer who used to sit in centre quite visible to spectators also. The sitting arrangement of *kutupais* highly functional. In ancient theatre the backdrop singing and dancing was not there like modern theatre and cinema. Again it is the symbol of justification for one's contribution.

There are some other architectural description need exploration like the measuring units, measuring string, pillars and the prescribed details for all three types of playhouses. The rituals are highly semiotic. The avoidance of backdrop symbolizes that ancient Indian theatre was symbolic and never tries to be realistic. Overall we can say really the *natyamandpa* depicted by Bharat Muni is highly symbolic that offers a set pattern of sign system and its proper dissemination. The *natyamandpa* prescribed by Bharat Muni seems to be primitive but he gives enough instructions decorate the theatre for both sacred and aesthetic purposes.

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