



BHARATA'S IMPACT ON ARISTOTLE'S DRAMATURGY

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ABSTRACT

It would be very interesting indeed to compare Aristotle's theory of drama with that of Bharata, the author of Natyashastra, a treatise on dramaturgy. If the Western drama derives its power and sustenance from the Greek philosopher's little book called the Poetics, the Indian theatre is based on Bharata's encyclopedic work, consisting of 36 chapters, mostly in verse. There are a number of points on which the two texts are in full agreement, though there is no denying that whereas the Greek text is quite brief and suggestive, the Indian text is very elaborate, prolix and explicit.

INTRODUCTION

The striking common points of the two texts; *Poetics* & *Natyashastra* are:

1. Aristotle's notion of drama as a form of *mimesis* or imaginative reconstruction has a very close resemblance with Bharata's theory of "Natya" as "Anukriti", "Anukirtana", "Anubhavana" "Anuvyavasaya" or "Bhavanukirtana". Just as there is a long controversy in the West regarding Aristotle's true meaning of the term "mimesis", Bharata's term 'Anukriti' or 'Anukarana,' too, has been subjected to varied interpretations. And just as Butcher's interpretation of Aristotelian 'mimesis' in terms of an ideal creative process has come to be widely accepted, Abhinavagupta's interpretation of 'Anukarana' in terms of the universalization of a particular experience (vide *Abhinavabharati*. p. 187 for Abhinavagupta's view, and p. 153 of Butcher's edition of the *Poetics*, containing his essay entitled

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'Imitation' As an Aesthetic Term for his view of Aristotelian mimesis) has emerged as a widely accepted meaning of Bharata's term.

2. In the IVth Chapter of the *Poetics* Aristotle describes 'mimesis' as a means of knowledge for the common man whose capacity for learning is quite limited. Clearly, in his view drama is a very easy means of imparting knowledge to the man in the street. Bharata, likewise, regards drama as the fifth *veda*, meant for all castes, including the Shudras whose capacity for learning is rather limited. (Vide the 12th verse of the first Chapter of *Natyashastra*).
3. Look at the following statement of Aristotle, made near the close of the first Chapter of the *Poetics*:

There are, again, some arts which employ all the means above mentioned- namely, rhythm, tune and metre. Such are dithyrambic and Gnostic poetry, and also tragedy and Comedy; but between them the difference is, that in the first two cases these means are all employed in combination, in the latter, now one means is employed, now another.

This statement of Aristotle readily recalls to our mind Bharata's declaration in the 117th and 118th verses of the first Chapter of the *Natyashastra*:-

न तज्ज्ञानं न तच्छिल्पं न सा विद्या न सा कला ।
नासौ योगो न तत्कर्म नाट्येऽस्मिन् यन्न दृश्यते ॥
सर्वशास्त्राणि शिल्पानि कर्माणि विविधानि च ।
अस्मिन्नाट्ये समेतानि तस्मादेन्मयाकृतम् ॥

[There is no knowledge, technique, skill, art or craft nor is there a work (in the world) which is not to be found in drama. There is admixture of all sciences, all crafts and of varied kinds of work in drama. This is why I have created it.] The word "समेतानि" conveys the sense of the various arts being used in drama in different places.

4. Bharata's statement in the 113th verse of the *Natyashastra*, regarding the depiction of the doings of all the three kinds of men "Uttama", "Adhama" and "Madhyama"- has been clearly echoed in the opening sentence of the *Poetics*. Chapter II:

Since the objects of imitation are men in action, and these men must be either of a higher or lower type (for moral character

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mainly answers to these divisions, goodness and badness being the distinguishing marks of moral differences), it follows that we must represent men either as better than in real life, or as worse, or as they are.

The words of Bharata are:

उत्तमाधममध्यानां
नराणां कर्मसंश्रयम्

[i.e. Drama is based on the doings of noble, ignoble and medium or average human beings.]

5. Aristotle's notorious statement in the VIth Chapter of the Poetics, namely, "without action tragedy would be impossible, but without character it would still be possible." is quite close to Bharata's assertion, made exactly before his famous Rasa-sutra in the 6th Chapter of *Natyashastra*, that without rasa no element of drama exists: "

“न हि रसादृते कश्चिदर्थः प्रवर्तते”

It must be borne in mind that what Aristotle conveys through the term 'action' (Praxis), Bharata conveys by the term "स्थायिभाव" (Sthayibhava) and it is "Sthayibhava" that manifests itself in "rasa" (vide the prose portion after verse No. 7 of the seventh chapter of Natyashastra)

6. As regards the function of Tragedy, Aristotle uses the term "Catharsis" and one of the popular implications of the term is "relief". In like manner, Bharata uses the term "विश्रान्तिजननम्" in the 115th verse of the *Natyashastra* for the justification of Natya (drama):

दुःखार्तानां श्रमार्तानां शोकार्तानां तपस्विनाम्
विश्रान्तिजननं काले नाट्यमेतद्विष्यति ।।

[This (poetic form) drama will prove to be the producer of timely relief for the people suffering from grief, fatigue and sorrow and undergoing penance]

No doubt, the Sanskrit word 'विश्रान्ति' (Vishranti) and the Greek term "Catharsis" or "Katharsis" considered as relief are very close to each other.

7. Just as the 'Katharsis' clause of Aristotle's definition of Tragedy, given at the outset of the 6th chapter of the *Poetics* gave rise to unending controversy among

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Aristotle experts, the rasa-sutra of Bharata, given "in the 6th Chapter of *Natyashastra* generated great heat among the commentators on the work such as Lollata, Samkuka, Bhatta Nayaka and Abhinavagupta and remains an open question till date. And in all probability "Rasa-Nispatti" and the "achievement of Katharsis" are the same concepts, stated in Sanskrit and Greek differently.

8. Aristotle and Bharata-both could be called structuralists in the sense that both regard the structuring of the events as of great value, the latter indulging more in elaborate structural minutiae such as "sandhis" and "sandhyangas" Aristotle seems to have derived his tripartite action of Tragedy (beginning, middle and end) from Bharata's pentagram of dramatic action (arambh yatna, praptyasa, niyata-falaprapti, and falayoga), detailed in the 21st chapter of *Natvashastra*. compressing and reducing it to three stages only.
9. Aristotle's proposition in the fifth chapter of the *Poetics* that Tragedy endeavours, as far as possible to confine itself to a single revolution of the sun is quite close to Bharata's proposition in the 21st chapter of *Natyashastra* that the dramatic form called "samavakora" should be of a time-limit of 18 "nadikas" (vide verse 66), where one nadika is equal to 24 minutes (for 'nadika', as Bharata says in verse 67, is equal to half of a "muhurta"—a period of 48 minutes).
10. The famous definition of Tragedy given by Aristotle at the beginning of the 6th chapter of the *Poetics* seems to be modelled on the definition of "Nataka" given by Bharata in the 10th and 11th verses of the 20th chapter of *Natvashastra*:

प्रख्यातवस्तुविषयं प्रख्यातोदात्तनायकं चैव ।
राजर्षिवंश्यचरितं तथैव दिव्याश्रयोपेतम् ॥
नानाविभूतियुक्तं ऋद्धिविलासादिभिर्गुणैश्चैव
ऋप्रवेशादयं भवति हि तन्नाटकं नाम ॥

[(The dramatic form called) Nataka is that which has its plot based on a famous legend whose hero is widely famed and noble; wherein the deeds of royal families are treated; wherein divine beings are involved; wherein is available varied kinds of opulence; which is embellished with poetic virtues such as "samaddhi" and "vilasa"; which contains a reasonable number of Acts and incorporates dramatic devices like "Pravesaka", suitably and properly integrated in it.]

Now compare it with Aristotle's definition of Tragedy which reads in Butcher's English rendering as follows:



"Tragedy, then, is an imitation of an action that is serious, complete, and of a certain magnitude; in language embellished with each kind of artistic ornament, the several kinds being found in separate parts of the play; in the form of action, not of narrative; through pity and fear, effecting the proper purgation of these emotions". (Note that the Greek word for serious can be and has been rendered by the term "noble" by Golden and others).

If Bharata's definition does not contain anything corresponding to the last clause of Aristotle's definition of Tragedy, cited above, the sage does supply a clause pertaining to the emotional material that "Nataka" is expected to contain. Bharata does this in his second definition of the genre in the 12th verse of the 20th chapter of his treatise. I cite the verse:

नृपतीनां यच्चरितं नानारसभावनेष्टितं बहुधा ।
सुखदुःखोत्पत्तिकृतं भवति हि तन्नाटकं नाम ॥

[That is the dramatic form called "Nataka" which is the deed born of the joys and sorrows of the kings, enacted in various ways, (evoking) a variety of rasas and bhavas.]

11. It is remarkable that the chief personages in a "Nataka" as well as in a Tragedy, it is emphasized both by Bharata and Aristotle, should be very famous and prosperous. In the thirteenth chapter of the *Poetics* Aristotle affirms about the hero of Tragedy that "he must be one who is a highly renowned and prosperous personage like Oedipus, Thyestes or other illustrious men of such families." Bharata, likewise, asserts that a Nataka should be about the deeds of a highly famed and noble hero-प्रख्यातोदात्तनायकम्'.
12. Just as Aristotle devotes Chapters XX-XXII of the *Poetics* to a discussion of the dramatic exploitation of the elements of language such as letter, syllable, connecting word, noun, verb, case, or inflexion, sentence or phrase etc., Bharata, too treats of these very issues in Chapters XV-XIX of *Natyashastra* in detail. It would be very rewarding indeed to make a comparative study of the two texts on these issues'-No doubt Bharata is far more inclusive and comprehensive than Aristotle on any of the linguistic issues mentioned in the *Poetics*. However, both authors are advocates of propriety in all matters concerning the use of language in drama.

13. Aristotle casually refers to gestures in the XVIIth Chapter of the *Poetics* and he regards them as very important for the success of Tragedy but Bharata treats of the gestures under the head of "Vrttis" in the 22nd chapter of *Natyashastra* on a very grand scale, calling them "natya-mata" owing to their importance in the theatre in respect of the evocation of different feelings and emotions in the audience.
14. The 5 quantitative parts into which a tragedy is divided-Prologue, Episode, Exode, Parade and Stasimon discussed by Aristotle in the 12th chapter of the *Poetics* have their counterparts in 5 "sandhis" or junctures- Mukha, Pratimukha, Garbha, Vimarsa and Nirvahana that Bharata discusses in the 21st chapter of *Natyashastra*.
15. "Peripeteia" (Reversal of the situation), and "Anagnorisis" the two most moving elements of Tragedy of Aristotle's formulation are quite close to what Bharata calls "Patakasthanakas" in *Natyashastra* Chapter 21.

Now, it is very natural to raise the question of who influenced whom- whether Bharata influenced Aristotle or Aristotle influenced Bharata. Aristotle's age is well known; he lived from 384 B.C. to 322 B.C. but the age of Bharata is not decided. Western historians think he wrote the *Natyashastra* in the second century (after the birth of Christ). But there are grounds on which it could be established that it was written in the sixth century B.C. Canakya, the author of *Arthashastra* and the contemporary of Aristotle uses many technical terms of Bharata's treatise terms like "सभास्तार" (Sabhastra) and "द्वास्थ" (Ovahstha). Bharata also uses terms such as "सचिवप्राङ्गविवक" (Saciva-prangavivaka) and "कुमाराधिकृत" (Kumaradhikrta) borrowed, in all probability, from an earlier "अर्थशास्त्र" by Brahaspati who is older than Kautilya or Canakya by a few centuries. And the Sanskrit dramatist Bhasa, who is definitely influenced by Bharata as is quite clear from the use by Bhasa of words like "प्रस्तावना" (prastavana), "विदूषक" (Vidusaka), सूत्रधार (Sutradhara), "मारिष" (marisa), "हाव" (hava), "भाव" (bhava), "प्रवेशक", (preksaka), "चारी" (cari), "गति" (gati), "भद्रमुख" (bhadramukha) etc. exactly in the same senses as does Bharata in the *Natyashastra*. Moreover, Bhasa uses "भरतवाक्य" (bharatavakya) at the end of his plays and that practice, followed by him faithfully, clearly shows that he knew Bharata. And Bhasa is earlier than Canakya or Kautilya, the author of *Arthashastra*. This has been demonstrated convincingly by M.M. Ganapatisastri on the basis of the kinds of "प्राकृत" (Prakta) that the two authors use. A.D. Pusalkar also supports and strengthens this view. His contention is that the Sanskrit and Prakrta, used by Bhasa, place him later than Panini but earlier than Katyayana. Thus it is evident that Bharata preceded Aristotle by at least two centuries. However, this is true only of the basic, essential and uninterpolated text of *Natyashastra*. And the similarities that I have pointed out above



between the *Greek* and the Indian dramaturgists are enough to prove that the earlier writer had influenced the later.

But the question arises as to how the Indian dramaturgist could have been able to influence his *Greek* counterpart, living thousands of miles away from India, in the Mediterranean world. This, no doubt, appears to be a preposterous proposition but when we bear the following facts in mind, it would prove to be within the area of possibility.

1. There had been long and age-old cultural as well as commercial exchanges between India and Greece since times immemorial via Persia (Iran). The sixth century B.C. Greek philosopher Pythagoras is widely believed to have visited India and learned many of the tenets of Indian philosophy such as the theory of "Punarjanma" (Rebirth or Metempsychosis) and the theory of numbers. The belief in Pythagoras's visit to India was widely held by the ancient Greek and Roman thinkers— Lucian, Clement and Apuleius, being most notable in the long list of such thinkers. And the German scholar- Leopold von Schroeder- has proved beyond all doubts that Pythagoras had certainly come to India and was instructed by the Indian sages. (Vide *Pythagoras and die Inder*. Leipzig, 1884, Chapters I-III pp. 5-59). He had also learnt from the sages of the "Shulba-sutras" the geometrical theorem known after his name as 'Pythagorean theorem'.
2. The third century A.D. Palestinian scholar Eusebius in his work *Praeparatio Evangelica* IX.3 alludes to the visit to Athens of certain Indian philosophers and to their scholarly disputes with the Greek Philosophers led by Socrates. Eusebius has recorded that to the Indian query regarding the scope of Greek philosophy when the Greek side maintained that "Man" was the centre of their investigation, the Indian philosophers had burst into laughter and pooh-pooed the suggestion as childish for how could one study. 'Man' before studying 'the Maker or Creator of Man' ? One of the disciples of Socrates and a contemporary of Plato, namely, Aristobulus had later reported this event to Aristotle. If the event recorded is true, then the possibility of the Greeks learning the theory of drama from the Indian sages cannot be ruled out. Some of the Indian sages who had visited Athens in 401 B.C., two years before the death of Socrates may have been students of drama and dramaturgy.
3. As Professor K.G. Srivastava has shown in his edition of the Greek tragedy *Antigone* (*Sophocles' Antigone*. Kitab Mahal, Allahabad, 1994, pp. 38.39) and in *Bhagavad Gita and the English Romantic Movement- A study in Influence*



(Macmillan India Ltd. 2002, pp. 52-53) Sophocles had used in *Antigone* II. 450-57 Valmiki's thought expressed in *Ramayana*, Yuddhakanda, verse 15:

देशे देशे कलत्राणि देशे देशे च बान्धवाः ।
तं त्वहं न पश्यामि यत्र भ्राता सहोदारः ॥

(Wives can be found in all countries and relatives can also be made in all countries; however, I do not see a country where one could find a brother born of the same womb).

That Sophocles knew about India pretty well is clear from his reference in *Antigone* I. 1038 to "Indian gold" which was to be preferred to the gold from Sardis - the silver gold, so called from a huge quantity of silver used as alloy in it. Now if Sophocles could make a creative use of a verse of the *Ramayana* in The fifth century B.C., was it not possible for Aristotle to make use of the Indian dramaturgy as available in Bharata's *Natyasashtra*. particularly after Alexander's invasion of India in 326 B.C. and in the wake of the resultant Indo-Greek contacts ? But the Bharatan influence on the *Poetics* was possible even in the absence of that invasion.

4. That Aristotle knew a lot about India is clear from references to India in his works especially in *Politics* 1332 b 24 where he asserts that India is the only country where the ruling classes could be discerned by their external features. His interest in India is borne out by his alleged request to his world-conqueror disciple-Alexander, the Great, to bring with him some Indian sages, while returning from India. And the disciple had tried to oblige his guru by taking the sage Kalanos with him who had burnt himself on account of illness on a pyre at Atock and had thus frustrated Alexander's plan of pleasing Aristotle by presenting before him an Indian sage in flesh and blood. The gymnosophist (naked philosopher) Kalanos may not have reached the Greek shores but the arrival of Indian philosophy and dramaturgy in *Greece* cannot be ruled out. And there are evidences to prove that Aristotle had benefited from the newly arrived Indian wisdom, brought by the philosopher friends of Alexander, who had accompanied the great conqueror to India and had returned to *Greece* safe and sound—philosophers like Pyrrho who had founded the sceptic school of philosophy. And the conqueror himself may have sent to *Greece* a lot of Indian lore along with his *Epistles* which reached *Greece* and were published though the writer could never return there to report personally about his Indian experience. The works of Alexander's Greek companions—Nearchus, Onesicritus, Aristobulos and Anaxarchus— are not extant today but may have been available to Aristotle.



5. The famous system of Aristotelian syllogism has a clear-cut Indian impact; it is based on the Indian syllogism, consisting of 5 members called 'pratijna' or proposition; 'hetu' or reason, 'udaharana' or example, 'upanaya' or minor premise and 'nigamana' or conclusion. This syllogism was invented and practised by the Nyaya school of Indian philosophy. Aristotle seems to have accepted the first three members and rejected the last two as superfluous, these being the mere repetitions of the second and the first. It is worth noting that the Aristotelian syllogism was called during the Middle Ages in Europe 'Barbara'¹ form of syllogism presumably because it was Indian in origin in the considered opinion of the schoolmen of the Middle Ages, India being a country of barbarians in the eye of Europe. If syllogism was, as Bertrand Russell asserts, 'Aristotle's most important work in logic, credit should go to India's Nyaya school from which it was ultimately derived. The lowest limit of the age of Gautam, the founder of Nyaya in India, according to Western scholars, is fifth century B.C., though the Indian tradition assigns him a period several centuries earlier than this. Even if Gautam flourished in the fifth century B.C., he could very well have influenced Aristotle who was later than the former by at least 100 years.

But the question is: 'How did Aristotle learn the system of the Nyaya school?' The answer is: through his compatriot Democritus (C. 460-C.370 B.C.), who was a contemporary of Socrates and had travelled to far distant countries including India where he had learnt, in all probability, the atomic theory of the formation of the universe from the Vaisheshika school of Kanada, who was a contemporary of Gautam. Regarding Democritus's visit to India, Professor D.R. Dudley uses the word 'perhaps'¹. But that in itself speaks volumes for the Greek's visit to India. (Vide his entry on 'Atomists' in *Penguin companion to Literature 4: Classical and Byzantine Plus Oriental and African*; London, 1969, pp. 37-38). One very decisive proof of the influence on Aristotle of the Vaisheshic system via Democritus is the fact that the Greek philosopher regarded the number of the basic elements of the world not as 4 (accepted by the majority of the Greeks) but as 5 in accordance with the Indian tradition; this fifth element is what Indians call 'akasa' and what Aristotle called 'ether'. This information is available in the philosopher's biography by Diogenes Laertius (*Lives of Eminent Philosophers* trans. by R.D. Hicks in 2 volumes. Vol. I, p. 479, William Heinemann London).

6. Most of the widely travelled and eminent Greek philosophers—Pythagoras, Plato, Xenophanes, Parmenides, Empedocles, Anaxagoras and Zeno of Elea and later Apollonius of Tyana and Plotinus— all were influenced by India. Herbert H.Gowen, who knows Greek and Indian philosophy with equal competence, boldly observes on Indo-Greek philosophy:

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The doctrines of the Eleatics, such as Xenophanes and Parmenides, that God and the Universe are one, and that thinking and being are identical, seem to savour of the Upanisads and the Vedanta. The doctrine of Thales that the universe originated from the element of water, also seems to have affinity with early Indian ideas. The teaching of Empedocles that matter is eternal and indestructible, is quite in accord with the teachings of Samkhya. Tawny declares, indeed, that he (i.e. Empedocles) has made as near an approach as a Greek could make to the doctrines of Hindu philosophy. Indeed, his personality was almost as much Hindu as Greek.

(A History of Indian Literature. New Delhi. 1967. p.262)

Evidently, contact between India and Greece was very deep even before Alexander's invasion of India in 326 B.C. If there is any doubt about it, we can recall that Panini, the author of *Ashtadhyayi*. refers to the Greek script (yavanilipyam) in 4.1.49 of his great work on Sanskrit grammar, calling it "yavanani". Please note that Panini is very ancient; in all probability he lived in the 6th century B.C. or much earlier and in no case later than that.

In view of the facts recorded above, it is not surprising at all that Aristotle benefited immensely from the dramatic theory of the *Natyasashtra* which had been in existence for a hundred years before his (i.e. Aristotle's) birth. He was clever enough to adapt the Indian formulae to the peculiar needs of the Greek theatre through absorption and assimilation. If he could model his syllogism on the pattern of Gautam, could not he model his dramaturgy on the lines of Bharata? The view that Bharata was influenced by the Stagirite cannot be accepted because the work of the Indian sage is so exhaustive and elaborate that it appears original and not derivative at all. No aspect of the theatre and its working has been left out by him whereas his Greek counterpart gives the impression of being a theorist with very little first-hand knowledge of the practices of the theatre. With full justification Bharata has become famous in the Indian tradition as Acharya Bharata, master of drama and dramaturgy collectively called "Natya". Those who are still sceptical about Bharata's influence on Aristotle, should explain how a passage of the *Ramayana* of Valmiki was utilized by Sophocles in his *Antigone* and how innumerable passages of the *Upanisads* have their clear imprints on various dialogues of Plato as has been demonstrated by Prof. K.G. Srivastava in his book on the *Bhagavad-Gita* alluded to earlier (Second Chapter entitled "India in the Ancient Intellectual Tradition of the West", pp. 39-112.)



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