A Semiotic Study of Rituals in Bharat Muni's Natyasastra

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Abstract

The present article deals with the semiotic study of the rituals in *Bharat Muni's Natyasastra*. The *Natyasastra* offers a plethora of rituals while constructing the *natyamandap* (theatre house). The *Natyasastra* is the only ancient text that prescribes a scientific detail of the theatre architecture which stands authentic and meaningful in modern era as well when one considers its audio-visual aspect. The rituals are not merely the religious or seasonal ceremonies but an exploration of the hierarchical society prevalent in ancient India. The rituals are the signifiers referring to certain signifieds. These rituals are the social codes which highlight the place of theatre and its importance in ancient times in India. The rituals are the hallmarks that authenticate the religious nature of Indian drama. The Indian drama emphasises the performance text mainly which is a modern phenomenon in contemporary theatrical studies. Through rituals one can decode the socio-cultural structure of ancient Hindu society.

Keywords – *Natyasastra*, Rituals, Semiotics, Social Hierarchy, Natyamandap and Actor.

Theatre in India and especially in the *Natyasastra* is ritualistic to the core and rituals are an integral part of the construction of the *natyamandap* (theatre house). The English word "ritual" owes its derivation to Latin word "ritus", meaning custom. Rituals are themselves performative and through the ages, they have come to be embedded in theatre. It is well said that "Ritual, an integral component of Indian life, contains the seed of theatre. Ritual is sacred theatre and theatre is secular ritual" (Editor's Note in Shivprakash). The present paper analyses the rituals associated with the construction of playhouse (as depicted in second, third and fifth chapters of the *Natyasastra* mainly) from a semiotic point of view. The *Natyasastra* offers a galaxy of rituals associated with the theatre house and these rituals have been dealt with in the present article.

In Indian theatre, especially depicted in the *Natyasastra*, the rituals occur even before the construction of the playhouse, during the construction, prior to the performance, in the *nepthya* (tiring room), and during the performance. When an actor reaches the stage he/she touches the stage, an indication of showing respect to the profession. It is common in India, not only in theatre but even the sportspersons touch the playground as they enter the ground. According to Farley Richmond these rituals occur in the opening and ending mainly though the whole performance is replete with rituals.

Frederique Max Muller was among the early theorists who attempted to unravel the nature of myths and rituals. For him, myths and rituals were among the early poetic statements of ancient Indo-Europeans dedicated to the sun and other gods, later misunderstood as metaphysical events by the people they conquered. Later Andrew Lang Edward and B. Tyler challenged/resented this theory of Max Muller to establish that myths and rituals were not misunderstood but they were deliberate attempts on behalf of these people to explain the mysteries of the world. Both above mentioned thinkers consider rituals and myths to be "an interesting product of human mind" and "a 'primitive' way of reasoning."

There may be a grain of truth in the analysis of Andrew Lang Edward and B. Tyler. Rituals appear to be a conscious attempt on behalf of ancient societies to convey certain messages from one generation to another.

Most of the primitive cultures were religious in nature and god fearing as man did not comprehend the logical aspect of natural calamities, and to escape from the malevolent forces of nature people used to observe certain rituals. It appears plausible that rituals came into existence to unravel some of the mysteries of creation, to

understand and to reconcile with the forces of nature. These rituals were considered the direct offerings made by humane to the deity to whom they expected protection from such disastrous acts. Most rituals of ancient times were to propitiate the gods and the goddesses and to seek protection when faced with the fury of nature such as thunderstorms, hail, squalls, scorching sun, etc. at that time science had still not resolved all the mysteries of nature and neither could human beings understand or control these powerful natural forces. Rituals were thus invented by human beings and they were helpless before nature to explain the causality of different natural phenomena. Farley et. al. rightly points out, "The occasion of a ritual performance may be either seasonal or yearly festival propitiating the deity, or a specially commissioned ritual performance fulfilling a vow or seeking a boon for a family or an individual" (Farley et. al. 121-122).

In a Nietzchean way, it is indicative of 'will to power'. Human beings are weak against nature and basically because of this weakness and ignorance of the ways nature, primitive man tried to control nature through rituals. In such societies, theatre and rituals were used by men to propitiate the forces of nature, which in essence meant, they tried to control the natural forces for material prosperity and security. In the primitive societies, one particularly interesting use of theatre was to frighten the men, women and children, to promote reverence for gods. The rituals condition the people and prepare them to observe social hierarchy imposed by the state or a higher authority. The *Natyasastra* clearly warns man to be quite vigilant and careful as *Bharat Muni* warns in chapter 3 of the *Natyasasyra* entitled *Pujavidhanam* (Puja to the Gods of the Stage), "But when the auditorium is not consecrated in proper manner it will be indifferently helped by gods, and there will be an end of the dramatic

spectacle, and it will likewise bring evil to the king" (NS 54-55). It is a good example to see how people were interpellated by religious ideologies through theatre.

Emile Durkheim exploits the function and the instant impression of rituals on the mind of an observer. He focuses on the pragmatic utility of rituals in the general social structures. Rituals are rules and conduct to instruct people how they should behave in the presence of sacred objects and these rules are not to be deviated. From a Foucauldian perspective, it can be said that rituals prepare a person to be obedient to society and its hierarchies to ensure its proper functioning. Foucault argues in his *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of Prison* (1975), that discipline creates 'docile bodies', ideal for the new economics, politics and warfare of the modern industrial age. But, to construct 'docile bodies' the disciplinary institutions have to observe and record the bodies they control constantly; and to ensure the internalisation of the disciplinary individuality within the bodies being controlled. Analysing from a different angle rituals are also a religious process creating 'docile bodies' though the socio-political and cultural conditions of modern industrial age are totally different that of from the primitive societies.

Redcliff Brown and Eliade exploit the structural analogy between rituals and language. For them, a linguistic morpheme (the smallest unit of meaningful word) is similar to the smallest unit of structural unit of meaning of a ritual like a set routine of action (like preparing the place of rituals). If conceived in wholeness, rituals have their own system and structure according to which a set or part of rituals communicate. Malinowski belongs to the segment of the scholars who are concerned with the pragmatic aspects of rituals. He says that rituals are directed to an aim or a desired object. For him, ritual work according to a structure in which texts contexts play a

coordinate role.

Rituals set the role for an individual in a society. Rituals in Hinduism mark the journey of a person from one phase of life to another as Hinduism prescribes rituals for every phase of life. Rituals mark the life of a Hindu from birth to childhood through marriage and finally death. It is also fascinating that the earliest ritual known to human is related to death. These rituals do not mark of different phases of life but attune one to play a particular role in the society. Thus rituals correspond to social structures because through them an individual is transformed and put into a web of relationship. The prescribed ashram vayvastha (this system demarcates the life of an individual into four asharmas — Brahmcharya, Grahyasth, Vanprasth and Samyas respectively) in ancient Hindu society that declares the responsibility of an individual towards the society and the family is a clear indication of above mentioned point.

The *solah samskaras* (sixteen *samskaras* of Hinduism) are a good example of how the realisation of change and growth happens through these rituals. This Hindu tradition gives access to a Hindu to some special traditions and systems that were closed to him before the *samaskara*. For example marriage is a ritual that allows a person to have sensual pleasure as it is forbidden before marriage in ancient Hindu society. It is a journey from one state of life to another.

Rituals are the root of theatre throughout the world. Theatre has an associative connection with rituals and ancient Indian theatre is no exception to it. H.S. Shivprakash notes in his book *The Incredible India: Traditional Theatres:*

All over the world rituals contain the seed of theatre. The greatest theatres of the world were evolved from rituals – ancient Greek theatre from fertility rituals, medieval European theatre from church services,

Elizabethan comedy from spring festivals in Britain and so on. This is no doubt true of Indian theatre too. (9)

Rituals are performative in nature and they have an intrinsic element of action. In fact, the element of theatre might be first demonstrated by rituals. Rituals are a set of religious or mythical rules observed and performed publically to achieve certain objectives. The rituals, in ancient times, were performed where gods and humans understood the responsibility of maintaining order and harmony in the world and the cosmos. Hence, there was an affinity of purpose between drama and rituals in ancient India as both were performed to either appease gods, supernatural powers and ancestral spirits or to impart cultural or spiritual values to future generations.

The performances in ancient India were mainly based on certain festivals, but it was not mandatory as that of the Greek tradition. Some performances other than calendar base festivals were also performed. Thus, at initial level it works as a substructure of a larger socio-religious structure. Even the harvest festivals are addressed to a god or a natural phenomenon. *Vedic* literature presents certain instances where some specific events were organised to appease gods, ancestors and seasons *Yajnas* were performed to offer the gods a share of the crop, ghee and milk. The fire god *Agni* is considered the *purohit* (priest) who takes these offerings to the desired destination. Festival rituals are popular in India and have a close connection with performance too. It is evident that dance was the major practice to appease gods. The *mudra* (dancing posture), formed by the performer, is significant. Certain gods and goddesses have been attributed particular *mudras* (dancing postures) and hence, the mudra (dancing posture) is capable to signify the concerned god/goddess. Dr. Sreenath Nair states:

Hand gestures are an insistently indispensable part of rhythmic expression as outlined in the *Natyasastra*, which is supported by a combination of a range of physical and verbal means of performance such as percussion instruments, songs and words. On the other hand, a mudra, therefore, is essentially a cluster of symbolic movements having an explicit kinetic energies that are expressed through rhythm and trajectories of movements that bring the dancer's body into irresistible moments of choreographic experiences. (Nair)

Rituals are the integral constitutive element of drama in the Indian tradition and the *Natyasastra* prescribes a very well ordered set pattern for these rituals. *Bharat Muni's* emphasis on the method of *puja (worship)* and other offerings establishes the status of drama in the Indian tradition besides it the semiotic analysis of these rituals that unveil the cultural codes of Indian society of ancient times.

The process of the construction of the playhouse itself is full of symbolic rituals which require careful observation. The sacredness and sanctity of the dramatic space and performance are utmost importance. In the Indian thought system, dramatic performance connects the temporal and the spiritual; it is both human and divine. It, therefore, foregrounds an integration of the ritual, as a sign as well as an object, and its relationship with the human interpreter.

The theatre is consecrated like a temple and many rituals are performed which connect the profane space with the sacred one. The rituals performed during the construction of the playhouse, especially in second chapter, foreground the hierarchical nature of Indian society. The first and most common ritual in the *Natyasastra* is to clean oneself before any ceremony. This cleanliness indicates that

one should be free from all the impurities whether physical or mental. It is quite common to take a bath before any kind of *puja* (worship) in Hinduism. "Since they are most often performed within a religious context, they require ritual cleanliness and other devotional observances" (Richmond 124).

The sprinkling of *Gangajal* (water of holy Ganga river), highly symbolical, helps the doer to be mentally sound and to focus on the project at hand. It is obvious that the *Ganga Jal* (holy water of the *Ganga*) is sprinkled during such ritualistic occasions. The *Ganga* is acknowledged as the most reverend river and the river is hailed as *Ma Ganga* (mother Ganga). Its origin is believed to be divine and it has a close association to *Lord Shiva*.

There is a prescribed asterism for each architectural construction. The ground should be measured under the asterism *Pusya (Cancri)*, the foundation is laid under the asterism *Mula (Lambda- Scorpionis)*, and for the construction of pillars *Rohini (Aldeberan)* and *Sravana (Aquillae)* are the auspicious asterism. It explicates the importance accorded to astrology in ancient Indian architecture in practice. One cannot build a sacred structure without consulting the astrologer and doing it at the auspicious time and *tithi* (date).

Brahmins and cows are auspicious and sacred for the Hindus and their presence even before the commencement of construction of playhouse reflects the sacred character of the dramatic space. In Hindu tradition the cow is hailed as Gau-Mata (mother cow) and it is believed to be a symbol of nurturing as well. The cow is a symbol of divine energy and the female power. The cow represents non-violence and its milk is sacred and is considered to be a purifying element. In the Vedas the word

Gau (the cow) has dual meanings; cow and light. The second meaning fits in for the interpretation of the *Vedas* as 'spiritual light'.

Bharat Muni prescribes some food items, clothes and metals to be offered at the time of the construction of the Natyamandap (theatre house). The offerings such as food and colours used are cultural codes embodying the social structure. The food offering is significant as it highlights social hierarchy. It also indicates the social status of a person. Besides these offerings the dramatic master is advised to observe a fast of three days. Fasting is a spiritual activity in Hinduism and the number three has symbolic significance depicted in the second chapter of this thesis.

The construction of pillars is highly pregnant with cultural codes. Their very order verifies the *Varna* system prevalent in ancient times. The *Brahmin* is at the top and the *Sudra* at the bottom whereas the *Kastriya* and the *Vaisya* stand at number two and three respectively. The construction of the order of pillars in the *Natyasastra* follows the order of the *varna*. The colours attributed to the pillars by *Bharat Muni* signify the status of *varna* in ancient Indian society. He attributes white colour to the *Brahmin* pillar, red to the *Kastriya*, yellow to the *Vaisya* and black to the *Sudra*. The colours are quite significant here. Not only the colour but the food offerings is also significant. *Payasa*, the most acknowledged food is offered and a piece of gold is prescribed for the foundation pit for *Brahmin* pillar. The nature of offering signifies the position of the *Brahmins* in ancient Hindu society. The offerings prescribed for the *Kastriya* pillar are less valuable than the *Brahmin* pillar that is again significant and indicates the position of the *Kastriya*. Rice mixed with molasses is offered to twice born caste and a piece of copper is prescribed to be put into the foundation pit. During the construction of the *Vaisya* pillar the *Brahmins* are offered rice with ghee and a

piece of silver is to be placed into the foundation pit. While during the construction of the *Sudra* pillar the twice born caste are fed with the *krsara*, the lowest in the order of mentioned food items and a piece of iron is prescribed to be thrown into the foundation pit which is again the cheapest metal among the prescribed metals for the pillars. At the time of the construction of *mattavarnis* the *Brahmins* are propitiated with the *Payasa* while the rest of the persons are fed with the *karsara* and salt. Hence, the selection of offerings is a chart displaying the social hierarchy of ancient Indian society.

In the verses 1-8 of chapter 3 of the *Natyasastra*, *Bharat Muni* asks to make *Brahmins* and cows dwell for seven days in the theatre house. *Bharat Muni* asks these *Brahmins* to mutter *mantras* while being there in the theatre house. The word *mantra* comes from 'man', means 'think' and 'tra' is related to instrumentality like yantra. Collectively, the word suggests 'instrument to think' as its meaning. It is clear that the *mantras* are a part of a speculative knowledge tradition. This speculative tradition has its roots in spirituality because the *mantras* are believed to be directly coming from God's mouth. *Mantras* are a combination of syllables that are believed to be spiritual and a source of energy. According to the *Upnishads*, *mantras* were always there in the *prama akasa*, (sky) primeval ether out of which the universe is created. These *mantras* were already perceived by the ancient *rishis* (sages). Later they were transformed by the *rishis* (sages) into rhythms, forms and words. Another definition of the word *mantra* is that 'man' means to think and 'yantra' means 'to protect or to liberate from 'samsara' (the world). It means *mantras* are the thoughts that protect and liberate an individual.

Even today people believe that the chanting of mantras in a proper way can

drive the evil forces away that is why the *homa* is performed on all auspicious occasions. Still people go to the temple for curing the diseases and to get rid of the evil forces. Even such rituals are observed by the topmost scientific institution of India such as ISRO at the time of launching a new satellite. Hence chanting of *mantra* is an old significant tradition.

The *natyamandapa* (playhouse) came into existence due to obstruction created by the *daityas* (evil spirits), hence it requires the divine protection. The dramatic master invokes the gods to take their position to protect the art from evil.

The master of the dramatic art is supposed to be the main performer of the consecration rituals simply because the most experienced person in any clan or family usually performs rituals. The rest of the people automatically become obedient to the master of the dramatic art. This master of the dramatic art is never an ordinary person but someone who has subdued his senses and rich in the dramatic art. He is the main performer because the dramatic action and performativity are his main occupations. It is a kind of hegemonic process or the interpellation that makes the persons involved serious towards his occupation/duty.

The next step in theatre consecration is the installation of the gods in which the *achamana* is performed. *Achamana* involves sipping of water three times, repeating the names of the gods. While sipping water, some *mantras* are chanted and the various parts of the body are touched, viz., the eyes, the ears, the face, the navel, the head, etc. It is believed that one becomes pure by performing the *achamana*. The *achamana* is performed after answering the calls of nature, after walking in the streets, just before taking food, and after a bath as well. This serves as a reminder of the deity one reveres.

During the installation of the gods, certain items are used like red bangles, red sandal, red flavours, red fruits, barley, white mustard, shunned rice etc. Here red signifies the function of these gods in theatre house, and their function is to protect the art hence, valour and courage is required. The offerings to the gods in chapter 3 of the *Natyasastra* are largely in the order *Brahma* describes them. Thus, even the gods are assigned functions in the theatre house. As far as the objects used in the installation of the gods are considered, collectively they signify nature in its material forms. Once again spiritual and material needs of the human beings are combined to bring about stability and prosperity to human beings as well as to dramatic art.

The above mentioned rituals are performed in the empty *nataymandap* (playhouse). In ancient Indian dramatic tradition the *purvaranga* (preliminaries to the play) plays a significant role where the dramatic master with other persons involved in the event perform certain rituals to please the gods and the gods are invoked for the success of the performance. There are a total of nineteen *purvarangas* (preliminaries of play), nine are performed behind the *yavnika* (curtain) and ten when the *yavnika* is withdrawn. *Dhruva* songs are performed to please the gods but these songs make the *Raksasas* (demons) angry and then the *Nirgita* is performed to pacify these *Raksasas* (demons). The performance of the *Dhruva* and the *Nirgita* signifies the harmonious balance and liberal aspect of the *natya* (drama) where all are welcomed irrespective to their social status. It is noteworthy that the *Daityas* and *Raksasas* were doubtful about their representation in *natya* (drama) from the beginning and they reported it to Lord *Brahma* alleging him for favouring the gods only. Lord *Brahma* counselled them and explained the objective of drama clearly,

I have prepared this Natyaveda which will determine the good luck or

ill luck of you as well as of the gods, and which will take into accounts acts and ideas of you as well as of gods. In it (*natya*) there is no exclusive representation of you or the gods: for the drama is a representation of the States (*bhavanukirtana*) of the three worlds (NS 17).

The ritualistic offerings to the gods are capable to explicate the nature of the concerned and his/her position in divine order. Like the society of profanes there is a hierarchy in celestial region as well. Hindu tradition does not approve of any prejudice against the lower strata whether the profane or divine as the *natya* (drama) is concerned. The *Natyaveda* is available to all irrespective *varnas*. Here not only the *devas* (gods) are worshiped but the *Raksasas* are as well. This *natya* (drama) is the symbol of wholeness and integrity. Verse 88 mentions the *homa*, an auspicious ceremony where the priests chant the holy mantras and offer the *ahuti* (offerings) in the holy *agni* (fire). It is believed that these fire offerings reach to the gods one is invoking. The *homa* is a common auspicious ceremony in Hindu religion which is observed at various occasions such as the *muharta* (inauguration), birth of a baby etc.

In chapter 3, verse 87-89, of the *Natyasasta*, the breaking of the jar ceremony is described by *Bharat Muni*. It is linked directly to the future of the king and to dramatic art. It appears to be a ritual that somehow influences the psyche of people. In this ritual the jar used, is made of clay and possibility of it breaking into pieces is quite high. When broken it satisfies the ego of the people involved in the ceremony. *Bharat Muni* says that if it is broken, the enemies of the king will meet their destruction. "In case the jar remains unbroken the king (lit. the master) will have a cause of fear from enemies; but when it is broken his enemies will meet with their

destruction" (NS 53-54). It therefore, symbolises the ego satisfaction. During the older days, people used to perform certain ceremonies before going to wars. In these ceremonies they used to perform a mock combat and act out the killing and torturing of their enemies in a dramatic way. Such performances were performed in the absence of the enemies therefore, their objective may not be terrorising. By performing such activities the warriors might be preparing themselves mentally for the coming combat or they might do so for self-excitation or self-exhortation. It indicates that it was an attempt to overcome fear through imagination.

After breaking the jar, the master of the dramatic art illuminates the whole stage with a ritualistic action. He lights the *diyas* (lamps) by running here and there in theatre house. While performing this ceremony he keeps on running, jumping and making certain sounds as well. Lightning a *diya* (traditional lamp) is considered a sacred activity in Hindu *Darshana* (philosophy). People light lamps in temples before the idols of deities. The lamp is a symbol of purity and knowledge that removes the darkness of ignorance. When *Lord Rama* returned to *Ayodhya* after killing *Ravana*, people lighted lamps in honour of their king. The lamp is therefore, a symbol of reverence as well. Before the commencement of any stage performance, even today, the dignitaries light the traditional lamp before *Ma Saraswati* who is the goddess of knowledge. Theatre house is like a school wherein the mission to eradicate ignorance is carried out.

In this ritual also, the master illuminates the stage with the light of knowledge. By creating spectacle that involves the spectators and makes them feel victorious over ignorance. Rituals have a magical aura about them. The performers expect something magical. In such a situation, the person repeating the myth becomes a super figure.

C.G. Jung comments on the close relationship between magic and ritual, "The idea absurd to us, that a ritual can magically affect the sun is, upon closer examination, no less than irrational but far more familiar to us than might at first be assumed" (Jung in Kurtiz 6).

Rituals are themselves sacred theatre that invoke certain kinds of emotions and in the context of the *Natyasastra* these rituals prepare the spectator to relish a theatrical performance. But whatever the performance is, the rituals, before the performance and during the construction of the theatre house, define the nature of the dramatic art in ancient Indian dramatic tradition. The rituals connect the playhouse with that of the temple. The sacredness of the place plays an important role in guiding spectators' cognition and perception. *Bharat Muni* also ascribes in last chapter of the *Natyasastra* that dramatic performance is the best way to please the gods.

Significantly, in India, the dramatic art is a constructive action that brings about both explicit and implicit as well as moral changes. And these changes are purely ethical and at times aesthetic. Durgadas Mukhopadhaya mentions that the objective of *natya* is not merely the entertainment but the amalgam of metaphysics and spiritual. "The pleasure of drama is not mere sensuous pleasure confined to the material world. It is a transcendental experience in its highest sense, which liberates rather than enslaves the body and the soul" (Mukopadhayay 243).

Thus, to borrow an expression from Thomas Hardy, rituals are performed to assign roles in the general drama of life. They have their significance in the context of the theatre house where aesthetics, spirituality and delight meet. Rituals in India are a complete aesthetic experience. All the sense organs including the faculty of imagination are engaged in a spectacle during these rituals. The rituals performed in

the *natyamandap* (playhouse) are cultural vehicles carrying the socio-cultural imprints directly associated with the life of the Hindus in ancient times. These rituals, are not lost in oblivion but are still practiced in modern Indian society as well. There can be no better place than the theatre house to produce such multileveled structures of meaning through rituals.

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