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The Definition of Performance in the *Nāṭya-śāstra*

Abstract

The article is dedicated to the use of the western term “drama” in studies of the Ancient Indian theatre. The aim of this paper is to demonstrate that the term which may be apt to define the classic Sanskrit theatrical works is inadequate for designating the performances of the early scenic tradition. The original forms of the Indian theatre were not actually dramas. That is why the universally used European category cannot fully suit as its definition. It is possible to single out at least two important features that distinguish the ancient forms of Indian theatre from what modern European aesthetics know as drama. First, it was oriented on a sacral not aesthetic result and therefore the basic characteristic of the drama – the overall aesthetic value of the performance – was lacking. Second, this was a theatre where the stage performance played the central role and did not require the presence of fixed literary text, to which, strictly speaking, the name of drama is traditionally applied.

When defining the performance of the Ancient Indian theatre, researchers traditionally recur to the universal category of the drama. No one, as far as I know, has ever wondered whether the European term was applicable to the Ancient Indian theatre at all. More than that, such doubts at first sight appear far-fetched and unjustified because the drama – one of the basic literary genres, standing side by side with the epic and the lyric – belongs to pivotal categories of European aesthetics, and is often regarded as a unique designation of theatricals. In fact, no generally accepted definition of the drama has appeared to this day, and scholars advance a wide range of interpretations of the term (Barnet, Berman, Burto 1971: 40; Shaw 1976: 123-124; Shipley 1943: 89). Nevertheless, European researchers have for several centuries regarded the drama as “a literary form or poem written for stage representation” (Fowler 1987: 51-53).

As we know, the term “drama” goes back to the Ancient Greek concept of “action” and is based on its Aristotelian interpretation. Now, Aristotle analysed the accelerated progress of theatrical practice, which within a mere century travelled the distance from the first dramatic works, in which the dramatic element proper was not yet clearly

pronounced, to the unsurpassed masterpieces of Ancient comedy and tragedy – so he was dealing with none other than local artistic experience.

Ancient Greek achievements were truly unique in many fields, the theatre included. It is amazing, in particular, that even the earliest Greek dramas were not merely performed but existed in a written form as literary works independent from the stage. “Tragedy <...> produces its effect even without action; it reveals its power by mere reading”, Aristotle wrote (Aristotle XXVI: 1462) – a premise never followed up by students of the Ancient Greek drama, though it is an important indication of the very early desacralisation of the theatre. The ancient world never recorded holy or sacral texts, which existed solely in the oral form. Only things considered secular, even profane, were recorded in writing – texts that could not do any serious damage when used by the uninitiated, whether deliberately or by accident.

Possibly, it was the absence of a sacral status, which always leads to the preservation and consolidation of the attained, that determined the unprecedented rapid development of the Ancient Greek theatrical tradition. Mere decades separated Aeschylus, who taught “men to be noble <...> by composing a drama full of the spirit of Mars” (Aristophanes 1907: 1030) and followed the noble teachings of divine Homer by praising him “the warlike virtues, the art of fighting, and of carrying arms” (Aristophanes 1907: 1045), from Euripides, who “dressed the kings in rags so that they might inspire pity” (Aristophanes 1907: 1070). The Aeschylean hero is taciturn, and whatever he says is high-flown, while Euripides ousted poetic speech to replace it with the vernacular. In his dramas “all spoke, both woman and slave, and master, young girl and old woman” (Aristophanes 1907: 955). That, too, comes as another proof of the repudiation of all that could produce a sacral environment for the Greek drama. In Aeschylus, who imitated the Homeric epic style, poetic speech still retains an air of the divine, while Euripides utterly stripped it of anything sublime as he proclaimed: “a poet ought to speak in human terms” (Aristophanes 1907: 1065). More than that, Euripides took pride in introducing “domestic matters” (Aristophanes 1907: 970) and common sense in poetry. The art of speech for Euripides is “the use of the straight lines and of the corners of language, the science of thinking, of reading, of understanding, plotting, loving, deceit, of suspecting evil, of thinking of everything...” (Aristophanes 1907: 965). The new, Euripidean drama had for its main goal a direct moral impact on the audience. Apart from vernacular language, it used reasoning and persuasion, before which not only the sacral but even the artistic functions of the drama receded.

Thus, when we use the term “drama” in the context of the Ancient Indian theatre, we do not merely make hidden reference to theoretical premises formulated in Antiquity but accept as a model what is really just a particular instance of the global theatrical culture. If drama theory had not developed in parallel with the Ancient comedy and drama, the theatrical achievements of Antiquity could have remained a purely local phenomenon, which would not have had its actual impact on the progress of the Eurocentric study of the theatre.

The problem is, beyond doubt, objective and, to varying extents, topical for every scholar of non-European culture. On the one hand, we cannot avoid turning to European

concepts as they have been made the basis for contemporary scientific terminology. On the other hand, not only are meanings expressed through words but, reciprocally, words actively influence the formation of meanings. This is why the mere use of the term “drama” in the context of Ancient Indian theatre studies badly misrepresents many of its crucial features or even ignores them.

The latter point is of great importance. Especially, if we take into account the fact that the Indian tradition – which, together with the Greek, was one of the two principal routes of ancient theatrical development – elaborated its own terms to designate stage performance. These terms are used in the *Nāṭya-śāstra*, an encyclopaedia of the Ancient Indian theatre, which embodies many centuries of scenic development from scenario-type ritual performances to the refinement of Sanskrit literary plays.

The term *nāṭya* is certainly the principal. It makes part of the name, *Nāṭya-śāstra*, which literally means ‘knowledge (or doctrine) of the *nāṭya*’. *Prayoga* is another essential term. Possibly original, or at least of a very early origin, it is found in the treatise for the world’s first scenic performance, whose idea belonged to the god Brahmā, to be implemented by the wise man Bharata. The same Bharata – now appearing as theoretician of the theatre – defines it as *prayoga* while offering a description of that performance to a reverential Brahmin audience (*samāśritaḥ prayogas tu prayukto vai mayā dvijāḥ*, NŚ.I.41). The word *prayoga* occurs another eleven times in his narrative (NŚ.I.5; 22; 25; 47; 52; 54; 64; 67; 75), which allows us to assume that it was used as a special designation for the oldest legendary form of Sanskrit theatre.

It is necessary to understand why the first performance, which Brahmins staged for gods, was termed *prayoga* – a Sanskrit word polysemantic in itself (Böhtlingk 1883: 166; Monier-Williams 1899: 688). Though its meanings include ‘spectacle’ and ‘performance’, they are secondary, to all appearances, and the word acquired them in order to designate the early theatre productions.

A more extensive context reveals clearly expressed ritual connotations of the word *prayoga*. Ancient Indian texts traditionally used it for “performance” of particular acts in the ritual process. It was thus synonymic of ritual procedure, and concerned the order and sequence of practical actions prescribed by a particular rite. In that sense, we can refer to the *prayoga* of the various forms of the *yajña* and later *pūjā*. The same name belonged to practical manuals that described a part of the ritual which was actualised only when the rite was performed. In other words, the term *prayoga* concerned not so much a description or theoretical knowledge of sacrifice as its performance (as exemplified by the description of the *prayoga* of the Vedic *cāturmāsya* ritual in: Bhide 1979: 148-163).

The application of the same term to the first legendary performance is significant in itself. First, it leads us to assume that the bearers of the tradition themselves regarded it as a particular form of rite addressed to heaven. Second, the choice of the term might be due to the almost literal precision with which the word *prayoga* carried the meaning of action unfolding at a particular instant – a meaning also expressed through the words “performance” or “representation”. The instance creates a playing area of meanings, in which the word “performance” can stand both for performing a ritual and a scenic play,

as either bears the features of a spectacle, though to varying degrees. The borderline between the two was highly conventional at the time when the theatrical tradition was emerging, and acquired its present-day meaning only through the later desacralisation of the theatre, which lost its generic link to ritual and transformed itself into one of the art forms, which was *sui generis* far less strict and compulsory. To all appearances, at the time when the Ancient Indian theatrical tradition was only taking shape, and the performance could not start without a *pūrva-raṅga* rite necessarily preceding it (Lidova 1994: 7-24), the scenic action was perceived in quite a different way – suffice it to say that the ancient theoreticians themselves referred to it in terms of a sublime ritual.

The word *prayoga* had another two basic semantic ranges. The first expressed joining together, attachment to something or a particular link – a meaning crucial for the root *yuj*. We cannot rule out that it played its part in the choice of the term to designate the early forms of the Ancient Indian theatre. As mentioned above, performances could be acted out for rather a long time only after the *pūrva-raṅga* ritual, i.e. they were attached, in a way, to that initial part of the ceremony of worship. According to the *Nāṭya-śāstra*, the spectacle started immediately after the end of the *pūrva-raṅga*, with costumed Brahmins appearing on the consecrated stage, which was separated as sacral area from the earthly world around. The audience regarded these Brahmins not so much as made-up performers but as genuine deities.

Of even greater interest is the other range of meanings of the word *prayoga*. A number of texts, including the *Rāmāyaṇa* and *Mahā-bhārata*, the myths of which were staged in two ancient forms of Indian theatre (the *samavakāra* “Amṛta-manthana” and *ḍima* “Tripura-dāha”), use it for ‘casting’ and ‘hurling’, which refers to any kind of weapon, in particular, missiles (Monier-Williams 1899: 688). The connection of these meanings with the earliest theatrical forms becomes clearer if we take into consideration that they represented nothing but sanguinary battles between gods and demons. The *Nāṭya-śāstra* mentions the first-ever, legendary *prayoga* as “an imitation of the situation in which the *daityas* were defeated by gods [and], which represented an altercation and tumult and mutual cutting off and piercing [of bodies]” (*anukṛtir baddhā yathā daityāḥ surair jitaḥ || sampheta-vidrava-kṛtā cchedya-bhedyāha-vālmikā* / NŚ.I.57-58). As follows from the above, when the theatre was in its cradle and much later, up to the introduction of special bans, the battle was performed before the adept audience’s eyes and played a crucial part and took up a greater portion of the scenic time. As far as we can judge by the *Nāṭya-śāstra*, various kinds of weapons were used on stage. The treatise describes such weapons in detail in the chapters concerning scenic props.

More than that, it is not quite clear whether the battle enacted on stage had only a scenic purport, at least initially. In the earliest period, it might have consisted of real duels out of which the combatants emerged with actual bleeding wounds. (A battle in which the fighters received bruises and bleeding scratches was an essential part of the ritual consecrating a new playhouse, as described in Chapter III of the *Nāṭya-śāstra*.) In this context, the use of the word *prayoga* also appears very apt, as its meanings, ‘cast’

and ‘hurl’ weapons, reflected the character of the early forms of Ancient Indian theatre as ritual battle performances.

The fact that in the Ancient Indian tradition the earliest forms of spectacle were ritual battles allows us to advance a hypothesis on the origin and original meaning of the key term, *nāṭya*. This term goes back to the Sanskrit root *ṇṛt*, whose Prakritic form, *naṭ* was the basis of many crucial categories of the Ancient Indian theatre. Of the same root is the word *ṇṛtya*, semantically close to the *nāṭya*, though usually used as a more specialised definition of the dancing and pantomimic theatre forms. The Ancient Indian tradition knew another term derived from the same root, *ṇṛtta*, which referred to dancing alone. The difference between all these three kinds of scenic action was the subject of theoretical studies by medieval Indian authors and contemporary European scholars (Varma 1957).

The authors of the treatise used one of these basic terms with reference to the first legendary performance, which the *Nāṭya-śāstra* calls not only *prayoga* but also *ṇṛtya*. Its performers are named dancers or, to be more precise, “the actors of the pantomime” (*ṇṛtyatām*) (NŚ.I.66).

If we proceed from the etymological affinity of the terms, we can assume that one and the same kind of activity, defined by the Sanskrit root *ṇṛt*, lay at the basis of all three forms of the spectacle – the dance, the pantomime and the *nāṭya*. The basic meaning of the root *ṇṛt* in Classical Sanskrit is ‘to dance’ or ‘move rhythmically’. We cannot rule out, however, that the root originally had a different meaning – not ‘dance’ but ‘display one’s power’. The latter meaning was first proposed by F.B.J. Kuiper (Kuiper 1960: 217-279). As he pointed out, the early texts – in particular, the *Ṛg-veda* – often applied the root to Indra, and also to the Aśvins and Maruts. *ṇṛt* has additional shades of meaning, such as ‘to be active’, ‘be full of élan’, ‘gesticulate’, etc. In particular, Kuiper refers to the *Ṛg-veda* V.33.6, where Indra is addressed as the immortal one who displays his manly potency (*indra tve hy ojo ṇṛmṇāni ca ṇṛtāmāno āmartah*). Proceeding from other scholars’ opinions, Kuiper assumes the existence of an Indo-European root *ner*, meaning ‘élan vitale’, whose derivatives are extant in a number of Indo-European languages. Also derived from it is the verbal noun *ṇṛta*, which occurs in the *Ṛg-veda*. As Kuiper sees it, it stood for manifestations of power or tenacity. He exemplifies his point with verses from the *Ṛg-veda* X.18.3, which refer to bereaved relations coming back from a funeral: “we have gone forth for dancing and for laughter to further times prolonging our life” (*prāñco agāma ṇṛtaye hasāya drāghīya āyuh prataram dadhānāḥ*). However, here, too, the entire context in which the word occurs testifies to an increasing élan of the living, achieved by various means after one of the community members has died. Proceeding from this, Kuiper supposes that *strengthening the élan vitale* (in particular, against impending death) was the general meaning of the word *ṇṛta*. As he sees it, the interpretation suits many more verses in the *Ṛg-veda* – in particular, the hymn X.29.2, which says: *ṇṛtaū syāma ṇṛtamasya ṇṛtām*. The conventional translation of the root *ṇṛt* in the *Ṛg-veda* as “dance” proceeds, as Kuiper sees it, from a secondary meaning of this root, which it did not originally have. As Kuiper assumes, the Sanskrit root *ṇṛt* had

that meaning, too, though it was marginal, but the contexts of its usage that have come down to this day do not allow us to say this for sure.

According to Kuiper, another Vedic word, *narmá*, derives from the root *nṛt*, whose proposed etymologies he does not find convincing. In conformity with his interpretation of the root *nṛt*, Kuiper considers that *narmá* referred to a particular verbal activity, and meant 'forceful speech'. As he shows, the word could acquire this meaning only in verbal duels, which actualised its original sense comparable to such a meaning of the word *nṛmṇá* as 'display of power' or 'heroic might'. According to Kuiper, the word *narman*, meaning 'joke', travelled an analogous, though not quite similar path of semantic development. Kuiper traced its origin to contests of time immemorial, in which Aryans boasted of their strength to display and increase their social prestige.

All this linguistic reasoning does not seem redundant if we take into consideration the origins of the key term of Ancient Indian theatrical tradition, with which we deal here. Importantly, many characteristics of the early *nāṭya* in the *Nāṭya-śāstra* correspond with amazing precision to the circle of meanings of the root *nṛt*, which Kuiper points out – those connected with the manifestation of élan vitale, as demonstrated by word or deed. We mentioned above the character of the *nāṭya* as ritual battle – which demands all kinds of acts testifying to vital force and might. Moreover, the *Nāṭya-śāstra*, gives a precise description of this kind of action, which may be seen as specific examples of Kuiper's etymological constructions.

According to the *Nāṭya-śāstra*, the early forms of the *nāṭya* were acted through a set of techniques defined by the category of *style* or *manner* of acting (*vṛtti*). The wise Bharata refers to them as he tells the Brahmins about his production of the world's first *prayoga*, based on the *bhāratī*, *sāttvatī* and *ārabhaṭī vṛtti* (*bhāratīm sāttvatīm caiva vṛttim ārabhaṭīm tathā / samāśritaḥ prayogas tu prayukto vai mayā dvijāḥ // NŚ.I.41*).

The description of these styles in the *Nāṭya-śāstra* preserves significant details of the character of the early *nāṭya*. The *sāttvatī vṛtti* is of the greatest interest in this sense. It is based on the doctrine of *sattva*, inner spiritual energy – a kind of élan vitale, which is among the fundamental concepts of Ancient Indian theatrical theory. The *Nāṭya-śāstra* mentions *sattva* on many occasions, disclosing its meaning in several definitions. They all, to varying degrees, demonstrate the mechanism of arousing the *sattva*, aimed to make the performer concentrate and strain his consciousness (*manas*) so as to make the emotions portrayed no less strong and spontaneous than his own.

We deal here with a peculiar method of re-creating reality on stage, a method that demands of the performer not merely to cope artistically with the outer manifestations of his part but to fully identify himself with his character – reincarnate the character, in fact. Only when he acquires the necessary mood can he come to the state of mind that fully corresponds to the emotions of the character enacted.

The drama performed in the *sāttvatī vṛtti* was, in a sense, the supreme attainment of acting. The art of transforming oneself into the character probably came from a system of meditation-based professional training, as testified by the *Nāṭya-śāstra* commentaries referring to that particular style. As he concentrated to cast aside all secondary moods

and overcome emotions bred by them, the actor was to achieve a state of all-pervading joy, a kind of euphoria. At the same time, he was to masterfully express that mood, representing the characters that should be majestic and defying one another (NŚ.XXII.40). Having accumulated spiritual energy that gave him joy, might and intoxication with his own power, the actor was to express it in words and actions filled with *sattva*. The actions performed by an actor in the *nāṭya* were specified in the characteristics of the four varieties of that style. Of the greatest interest for us is the *utthāpaka*, literally, ‘excitement’, which increased the performer’s fighting spirit before battle, displayed his strength by saying: “I am getting up my strength [for battle]”, and [challenged his opponent]: “You, [too], can show what you are worth” (*aham apy utthāsyāmi tvaṃ tāvad darśayātmanaḥ śaktim* / NŚ.XXII.42).

There was another variation of the *sāttvatī vṛtti*, the *saṃlapaka*, literally, ‘debate’ – a dialogue of opponents who showered insults on each other before the duel to increase their fighting spirit (NŚ.XXII.44).

Thus style served the scenic portrayal of battle, and fulfilled a well-defined function. As follows from its description, it was used for scenes immediately before the battle, when the opponents were ready for their duel and, as they came face-to-face, they strengthened their spirit and demonstrated it to each other. Growing to believe in their own invincibility and the enemy’s abject weakness, they insulted each other, often very derisively, making the challenge and starting the battle after that.

The battle was enacted in the *ārabhaṭī vṛtti*, another style which was exceptionally spectacular. The fight was acted out – and, originally, possibly fought in reality – with the stunts of martial arts, elegant movement (*cari*) and sophisticated gestures (*karana*). According to the *Nāṭya-śāstra*, all this included “much of struggle, personal combats, deceptions, betrayals, and much strife and sabre-rattling” (NŚ.XXII.61).

Penetrating this definition of the *Nāṭya-śāstra* is the idea of vaunting one’s strength, which precisely corresponds to the connotations of the root *nṛt*, as indicated by Kuiper. Both shades of meaning come to the fore at once – the display of strength as pure physical might and as spiritual energy, élan vitale, whose concentration brings victory. Also present here is the verbal duel mentioned by Kuiper, which helped to demonstrate superiority over the opponent with an arrogant oration full of strength.

Kuiper was most probably right when he supposed that the root did not mean ‘dance’ in the Vedic era. At any rate, it was a marginal meaning, to all appearances, connected with movement and gesticulation expressing force, which could be regarded as dancing if one so wished. This makes sufficiently evident the circle of meanings that enable use of the root *nṛt* to indicate scenic battles between gods and demons, that were based, according to the *Nāṭya-śāstra*, on the demonstration of physical and spiritual might.

In that sense, the initial meaning of the term *nāṭya* can be interpreted as ‘demonstration of power’. Due to the pantomimic and dancing character of the early forms of the *nāṭya*, the root *nṛt* acquired new meanings, such as ‘to dance’, ‘play’ and ‘move rhythmically’, which soon became more typical than the original, which was eventually ousted. The *nāṭya* also changed later on to turn from battle scenes into courteous romantic drama,

whose plot no longer demanded fighting and demonstration of strength. On the contrary, such drama required elegant costumes and attitudes, inserted songs and dances. From the researchers' viewpoint, dance as the dominant element of the later drama proved the assumption of the original link between the *nāṭya* and dance. More than that, it enabled us to regard the classical *nāṭya* as a sophisticated form of dancing. However, as far as we can judge by the *Nāṭya-śāstra*, things were just the contrary. It all started with ritual battle performances, referred to as *nāṭya* or, in certain instances, *ṇṭya*. As their dancing element progressed, it resulted in the emergence of classical Indian dance.

The confirmation of the assumption expressed above can be found in the myth of the opening chapter of the *Nāṭya-śāstra*, which tells how one more style, called *kaiśikī* and directly linked to dancing, was added to the *nāṭya*. As tradition has it, after he produced a play based on three styles – the *bhārātī*, *sāttvatī* and *ārabhaṭī ṛtti*, Bharata reported his achievement to Brahmā, who ordered him to add the *kaiśikī*. The following dialogue is quite interesting. Brahmā asks Bharata what he needs for the *kaiśikī*. In reply, the wise man describes the new style he saw in Śiva's dance, which implied elegant movement and beautiful attire. As follows from his words, men cannot cope alone – women are necessary. That was when Brahmā created the *apsarases*, celestial maidens excelling in the dance, and passed them to Bharata to join the performance (NŚ.I.42-47).

To all appearances, this story reflects another stage in the formation of the *nāṭya*. At the beginning men were its sole performers – which may be regarded as yet another proof of its original ritual status. The first performances were based on three styles, while a fourth – dancing proper – had not yet emerged. Most probably, the introduction of this style marked a cardinal change in the tradition. It manifested itself in the new imagery of the *nāṭya*, where the accent was no longer on the duellers' dashing movement and bleeding wounds but on the elegance of dancing and beauty of costumes. Such drama really could not be produced without women performers. Their appearance in the *nāṭya* later than men, as well as the emergence of a new, "female dancing" manner of acting, in the conventional chronology of the myth is rather clearly presented as secondary.

It is important to note that the introduction of women did not mean in itself the desacralisation of the theatre. To all appearances, this introduction was within the ritual tradition that can be proved by the practice of female temple dancers, which later became widespread, and by the female dance, added to the *pūrva-raṅga* ritual. Chapter IV of the treatise bears a detailed description of this dance and characterises the ceremony preceding it. According to the *Nāṭya-śāstra*, only one female dancer appeared on the stage in the beginning, holding flowers in her hands. Her entrance upon the stage was accompanied by music played with stringed instruments and drums. On entering, the dancer should have been in a ritual pose (*vaiśākha-sthāna*) in which she performed four successive movements (*recakas*). Then she went around the stage, scattering flowers from her hands so that they would create a *maṇḍala*. Worshipping the gods in this way, the girl next revered them with bows and made a series of different gestures. It was followed by a small *mise en scene* performed by her, in which the content (*vastu*) of the song sung simultaneously was delineated by gestures while the instruments were silent. After that,

she receded from the stage, on which a group of female dancers appeared in the same ritual pose to perform a solemn dance (NŚ.IV.276-282).

Enriched by dancing, involving female performers, the *pūrva-raṅga* received a new name, *citra*, literally, ‘picturesque’ or – as it is often translated – ‘mixed’. It was thus separated from the earlier form of the ritual, known as “pure” (*śuddha*), performed by men alone without female dancing interludes (NŚ.IV.14-16; V.158-163).

There is a legend in the *Nāṭya-śāstra* that offers an even more detailed description of the origin of dancing and the “picturesque” form of the *pūrva-raṅga*. It is told at the very beginning of Chapter IV and dedicated to the visit of Brahmā to Śiva. Accompanied by all the gods, he came to perform for Śiva the very first performance of *nāṭya*. Brahmā addressed Śiva as the greatest expert on the *nāṭya*, the one who would best appreciate the scenic spectacle. As the legend has it, Śiva saw only one weak point in the performance, and improved it by adding dance to the drama.

This assertion is universally recognised, and can be found in general works on the Oriental theatre and in special research on Ancient Indian drama. As things really are, this interpretation of the *Nāṭya-śāstra* legend is not quite correct. The treatise really says that, when he saw the *nāṭya*, Śiva recollected dancing movements and attitudes he had himself invented in times immemorial – at a certain “dark time”. That might be the *pralaya* period, whose advent was directly connected with the *tāṇḍava*, an orgiastic dance destroying the Universe (NŚ.IV.13). Though Śiva is willing to share his knowledge of dancing, he finds that it must complement not the *nāṭya* but the preceding ritual, that is, the *pūrva-raṅga*. These are the words he addresses to the supreme god: “May you [o Brahmā] use this [dance] in the *pūrva-raṅga* and added to the *vardhamānaka* <...> for proper representation of the content [of songs with the help of dancing]. The *pūrva-raṅga* that has [just now] been performed was known as ‘pure’, and once this [dance] joins it, ‘mixed’ will be its name” (*pūrva-raṅga-vidhāvasmiṁs tvayā samyak prayojyatām / vardhamānaka-yogeṣu... arthān samyag evābhineṣyasi / yaś cāyaṁ pūrva-raṅgas tu tvayā śuddhaḥ prayojitaḥ // ebhir vimiśritaś cāyaṁ citra nāma bhaviṣyati / NŚ.IV.14-16*).

As the context makes clear, there was no dancing in the religious ceremony performed before and seen by Śiva. That is why it was called “pure”. Śiva determined to enhance this ceremony with a dancing interlude. In his opinion, the dance was to delineate the content of the songs sung at the beginning of the scenic part of the *pūrva-raṅga* (NŚ.IV.14-15). Such *pūrva-raṅga* received a new name to distinguish it from the previous form and it was known as “picturesque” or “mixed” from then on. Most probably, this legendary testimony is right and the “pure” *pūrva-raṅga* is really more archaic than its “picturesque” version. The instant Śiva chose for dancing precisely corresponds to the interlude performed by female dancers. Female dance was most probably added to the *pūrva-raṅga* rather late – at any rate, only after the basic part of the ritual structure took final shape and was firmly established. The dance was, in a way, mechanically inserted in the very beginning of the scenic part of the *pūrva-raṅga*, and had no influence at all on the further development of the ritual events.

To distinguish between the three forms of scenic representation – *ṇṛtta*, *ṇṛtya* and *nāṭya* – is of special importance in the context of the genetic interlinking of dance and drama. It is all the more important when we take into account the pantomimic character of the early drama – i.e. it was largely based on the movements – that was later made into the pivot of classical Indian dancing. It is significant in this sense that the difference between the *ṇṛtta*, *ṇṛtya* and *nāṭya* did not pertain to postures, gestures and movements, which were, in fact, the same for all the three spectacle forms. It concerned the content or the meaning of particular movements. We can assume that dancing was a purely decorative art, which did not illustrate any content – unlike the pantomime, which was based on an elaborate gesture language and able to express sophisticated ideas through imagery. This way of seeing it is by no means a scholarly interpretation, but adequately reflects the vision of tradition. There is ample testimony to the latter point – suffice it to mention numerous indications in the *Nāṭya-śāstra*, proceeding from which we can form the following idea of the development of *ṇṛtta*, *ṇṛtya* and *nāṭya*. The *nāṭya* was the first to take shape, with every gesture and movement meaningful and serving to reveal the plot. Plastic expression predominated in battle scenes, partly counterpoised to verbal expression and even coming as its replacement. The domination of plastic expression resulted in an elaborated language of gesture at once visually representational and imbued with profound symbolism. Finally shaped and firmly established, this language began, at a particular stage, to be used not only to represent the plot of the *nāṭya* but also to literally translate the content of scenic songs (NŚ.VI.285-287). Both were performed simultaneously – a male or female dancer represented in graceful movement the song a singer was singing. That was, most probably, how the *ṇṛtya*, pantomime proper, emerged. It must have appeared when women joined the cast of the drama. The *ṇṛtya* became a simplified and less elaborated “female” form of the *nāṭya*, as performing the latter was initially, and for a long time afterwards, a male actors’ prerogative.

The dance – *ṇṛtta* – took shape the latest of all the three. To be more precise, this assumption concerns the early forms of dance that preceded classical Indian dancing, genetically linked with the *Nāṭya-śāstra* tradition. The *ṇṛtta* simplified the symbolic theatrical idiom even more than the *ṇṛtya*. Unlike the pantomime, which represented song through movement and gestures, the dance had purely decorative functions and did not serve to express any particular meaning or content. The matter is discussed in a dialogue – preserved in Chapter IV of the *Nāṭya-śāstra* – between Bharata and Brahmins, who are very much interested in the function of dancing. If experts recommend the use of gestures (lit. *abhinaya*) to draw out the sense of songs and speeches in the performance, then what led to the making of dance and what is its nature? Why is dancing connected to songs when it doesn’t merely reflect their meaning or transfer their spirit? In reply, Bharata says that dancing does not pursue any special goals whatever but is present simply because it creates beauty. Furthermore, the dance is naturally loved by almost all people, as it is eulogised as being auspicious (NŚ.IV.265-268).

The dialogue is very significant. It clearly shows that, even at the time of the *Nāṭya-śāstra*, bearers of the tradition clearly distinguished the dance from the more sophisticated

scenic forms – the pantomime (*nṛtya*) and the *nāṭya*. Thus, the difference was seen not in the degree of sophistication but in the principle of the meaningful and the outer decorative. Besides, it follows from the above that scenic culture progressed not through complicating the original dance forms – first to the pantomime and then to the *nāṭya*, but the other way round, as particular simpler arts separated from the one theatrical whole.

The progress of the *nāṭya* created a ramified universe of plastic arts, which initially imbued the ritual spheres and spread later to the secular. The situation brought into the foreground among the meanings of the root *nṛt* the sense ‘to dance’, which began to be perceived as the principal and original, what – at first sight – corresponded to the idea of the *nāṭya* as a complicated form of dancing.

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