

# Bharata Returns: Autumn School on the *Natyashastra*

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Walking amidst the beautiful and serene surroundings of the Indian Institute of Advanced Study, Shimla, I used to wonder whether Bharatamuni with his disciples had inhabited the range of the mountains in the vicinity of this place long ago. The *Natyashastra* of Bharatamuni tells us that he, along with his one hundred sons or disciples, had been practicing theatre in this area and it was here that his discourses on the art of drama and theatre were delivered, which went on to form the corpus of the text of *Natyashastra*.

Though I chose to work on an entirely different area of study for my project at the Institute, fortunately my engagement with Bharata's *Natyashastra* could continue. The Institute accepted my proposal to organise a two-week school on the *Natyashastra*. The basic purpose of the school was to read and understand Bharata's text and this was hopefully going to give me an opportunity to share and improve upon my understanding of this voluminous ancient compendium of a varied and complex nature.

The preparations for the school were underway. Professor Chetan Singh, the Director of the Institute, was taking an active interest, and Kamalji, as its Academic Resource Officer, was also cooperating actively. I was feeling somewhat excited about the event. The notification for inviting applications for the school had been posted on the Institute's website. There had been an overwhelming response from all corners of the country.

The school was to be held from 26 August to 7 September 2014. As the countdown for the programme began, I was more excited and also worried about its success. I knew that it was going to be quite an experiment and a new experience for me. For the first time in the recent history of studies on the *Natyashastra*, this kind of an exercise — to understand the text by a group of specialists drawn from diverse disciplines — was being attempted.

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Around eighty applicants were desirous of participating in the school. Twenty-seven were initially selected. Of them, nineteen finally turned up. It was a heterogeneous group across different ages and professions. The participants finally came from Kerala, Tamil Nadu, Puducherry (Pondicherry), Telangana, Andhra Pradesh, Bihar, Jharkhand, Maharashtra, Punjab and various towns of Uttar Pradesh and Madhya Pradesh.

After the issuance of selection letters, we were continuing to receive eager messages and telephone calls from many others who implored and urged upon me to see if they could still be included.

As was usual with all the programmes of the Institute, the inaugural session started on time, at 10 on the morning of 26 August.

There was a distinguished gathering before me. Some were familiar faces. Vidyanand Jha, a renowned Professor of Management at IIM Calcutta, was amongst the participants. I had met him for the first time at the *Mahabharata* school organised by IIAS. We had been in contact since then. He was sent as an expert by the Government of India to evaluate the development schemes of Rashtriya Sanskrit Sansthan, which I had been heading as Vice-Chancellor. I was aware of his deep interest and involvement with the classics. I could see Praveen Bhole, an Associate Professor in the Lalit Kala Kendra of the University of Poona. I had met him only a few months back in a seminar on theatre organised by Satish Alekar. He had worked with the great theatre directors of our times like Eugeno Barba, and had also been to Poland to study the theatre of Grotowsky. That Jha and Bhole chose to join this school as participants made my task as convener even more challenging and stimulating. Sujata Mohan and Medini Hombal I had known as scholars of the *Natyashastra* and exponents of Bharatanatyam. Sujata ran her own dance academy and taught at University. I knew Medini's grandfather, Shankar Hombal, and had seen a performance directed by him at Bhopal. Her father, Prechand Hombal, too, was a Professor of Bharatanatyam at BHU. I had interacted

with him on a number of occasions in seminars, and recently had the occasion to see a play directed by him at BHU. The excellent performances by the students of Medini, I had seen only a few days earlier, when I visited her university — the Indira Kala Sangit Vishvidyalaya — as chairman of the Peer Team from the National Assessment and Accreditation Council.

Amongst the rest of the participants, I knew only Sonal Nimbkar, Manoj Mishra and Rishabh Bharadwaj.

“In due consideration to the specializations of this scholarly gathering.... we will forget the distinction between resource persons and participants. There are some participants here who could actually be worthy resource persons for this School. The fact that they have chosen to join this School as participants makes this whole exercise especially meaningful,” I said in my introductory remarks. I also tried to bring out the inadequacy of Realist theatres of Europe and the quest for alternate models in aesthetics and theatre in Asia; and the importance of a text like the *Natyashastra* for understanding a different worldview, the rhythm of life and the holistic approach, which have been lost in the present world.

It is customary in schools and seminars organised under the aegis of the IIAS that after the opening remarks by the Director and introductory remarks or a key note address either by the convener of the programme or by a scholar, the participants are asked to introduce themselves. During introductions, most of the participants explained their reasons for joining the school, with some also reiterating their commitment towards or appreciation for the *Natyashastra*. It was Pravin Bhole who gave a jolt. He said that he was there because he wanted to reject the *Natyashastra* or something similar. I could sense the challenge that lay before me.

I was doubting whether the inaugural session has really set the tone for the school. I have known Prof Chetan Singh, the Director of the Institute, to make very perceptive remarks with his wonderful sense of humour and a touch of intimacy. In his opening remarks, he sought to explore the natural and close relationship between life and theatre. Narrating his own experience of performing drama during his school days, he discussed the complex nature of an actor’s creative process.

The first day went well. As per the schedule, I could complete the teaching of the first and second chapters of the *Natyashastra*. After that, there was lecture by Abhiraj Rajendra Mishra and paper presentations by Akhil Vimal and Malakshmi. By now, I had come to know some of the other participants better. Ravindra Mundhe was visually challenged. He was an extraordinary personality with exceptional achievements. He had done his Masters in Performing Arts twice with different specialisations, M.Phil. in Dramatics and Film Studies and

was pursuing his research work in this very area at the MGAHV, Wardha. There was Shakir Tasnim, a graduate of NSD, who was presently heading the Department of Performing Arts in the Central University of Jharkhand. Dharmakirti Sunmanta had established himself as a script writer and a dramatist. Om Ramchandra Bhutkar was a writer-cum-actor.

In the forenoon sessions, we generally read the text of the *Natyashastra* line by line from its abridged version prepared by me for this occasion. There were lively exchanges and questions as I slowly proceeded to explain the stanzas. This collective exercise was quite stimulating. Earlier, quite a few persons had studied the text with me individually. They were singular seekers of knowledge. Lubna Mariam from Bangladesh was one of them. During her last visit to India, I had told her about this programme. She had expressed keen interest in attending the school on the *Natyashastra* and was willing to even come at her own expense. I had informed her about the advertisement for the *Natyashastra* Autumn School. But she had lately been very busy in organising activities of her theatre-group at Dhaka, and could not come.

During the School, six resource persons delivered lectures on different aspects of the Indian aesthetics, theatre and performance traditions. Rajendra Mishra, former Vice-Chancellor of Sampurnanad Sanskrit University, gave a special lecture after the inaugural session. He presented an overview of the contents of the *Natyashastra*, emphasising the possibilities of their application to modern contexts.

K.S. Rajendran, a dynamic person, committed to his work, delivered six lectures for the school, covering several aspects of theatre performances according to the *Natyashastra*, examining their relevance to modern theatre. Gautam Chatterjee delivered three lectures on *rasa*, *bhāva* and *abhinaya*. He explained the deep and intrinsic nature of basic emotions and their manifestations in performance.

There were also some odds. I was teaching the text for three hours or more daily during the forenoon sessions. For the afternoon sessions, I needed resource persons. I wished Kamaleshdatta Tripathi ji could come, but he had personal problems. K.G. Palause expressed regret at the last moment. Luckily, all the afternoons were buzzing with activity — especially the lectures by resource persons like Rajendran, Mahesh Champaklal, Gautam Chatterji or Bharata Gupta. The evenings were occupied with programmes like film shows or theatre performances directed by K.S. Rajendran, Kavalam Panikkar, Padma Subrahmanyam or Bhumikesh Singh. The liveliest were the live performances by Sujata Mohan, Sonal Nimbkar and Medini Hombal. A documentary film

on the *Natyashastra* titled *Pancham Veda*, produced and directed by Gautam Chatterjee, was screened during the school.

My plan to organise an evening of musical recital based on the system of music expounded in the *Natyashastra*, however, suffered a setback at the last moment. I had banked upon Sanjay Dwivedi, who was to come as a participant. But just a day before the inauguration, he communicated his inability to come. He had worked on the *Natyashastra* for his Ph.D. under my supervision. Trained in classical music in the tradition of Kumar Gandharv, he was emerging as a doyen of music. He would have enthralled the select audience at the School. I had earlier arranged an evening of music recital by him on the occasion of another School on Abhinavagupta at the IAS itself, and remember how Kamleshdatta Tripathi ji had appreciated him.

I had included a dhrupad recital by Sangita Gundecha and rendering of some compositions by Chinmayi to felicitate Sanjay Dwivedi's performance. Now that he was not coming, I saw no point in holding the music programme as a part of the School on the *Natyashastra*. A notice for cancellation was being issued, but then I had an afterthought. Chinmayi, my daughter, was coming anyway and Sangita was also available. An evening of music could still be arranged in a different way. Luckily, the Fellows Council of Institute agreed to host this programme.

Mahesh Champaklal gave me a pleasant surprise by offering to deliver three lectures. He was set to join the Institute as a Fellow soon. He obliged me by arranging a visit to the Institute on his own. His three lectures outlined the three phases of the revival of Sanskrit theatre in modern times, namely, the phase of Western realistic oriented performances, the phase of performances based on the *Natyashastra* and the phase of contemporary experiments based on regional traditional theatre terms. He also established the relevance of the *Natyashastra* for modern production techniques. I re-discovered the talents of Bhumikesh Singh on this occasion, known for his experiments with *Chhau*. He amazed all of us by displaying the viability of the form for the performance of Sanskrit plays. He also demonstrated scenes from his own performances of *Bhāsa* plays. An evening of his demonstration-cum-lecture on the applications of *Chhau* was extremely stimulating.

We had a poetry recital session. I had requested Vidyanand Jha to engage in a session of his poems. His collection of Maithili poems published by the Sahitya Akademi was recently discovered by me in the Institute library. As an afterthought, I also remembered Rajesh Joshi, whom I had earlier requested to chair the paper presentation session of Sangita Gundcha. Sangita lived in Bhopal and Rajesh ji already knew her. But Sangita could finally not manage to join the school, so I had to inform him of the cancellation of her presentation. Now, I asked him to come for reciting his poems. At the eleventh hour

I also remembered that I should not forget that I was also a poet of some sorts.

The poetry recital was a good change. After the presentation of poems in Maithili, Sanskrit and Hindi by Vidyanand Jha, myself and Joshi ji, two of the participants felt inspired to present their compositions. Shakir Tasnim in Urdu and Mundhe in Hindi.

Bharat Gupt was also a man of rare specialisations. Only two stalwarts had made the attempt to master and practice the system of music as given by Bharata in his *Natyashastra* – Acharya Kailash Chandra Brihaspati and Pundit Onkar Nath Thakur. Premlata Sharma was a worthy disciple of Pundit Onkarnatha Thakur, and she had been working on music in the *Natyashastra*. Unfortunately, she was no more. Bharat was the only disciple of Acharya Brihaspati. The lectures by him covered authentic explanations of the musical system envisaged in the *Natyashastra*. He offered elaborate accounts of ancient musical scales and melodies, and provided details of how the grammar of Indian music envisaged by Bharata differed from the present Hindustani or Karnatak music. He also explained the meaning of many technical terms and concepts as well as their relationship with *bhavas* and *rasas*.

There were several thought-provoking discussions and presentations by the participants of the school. Pravin Bhole presented a paper on 'The Principles of Theatre Anthropology and the Technique of Angika Abhinaya in Sanskrit Plays'. He examined the categories of abhinaya in the *Natyashastra* from the perspective of modern concepts of theatre anthropology, and presented an interesting study of the systems of the *Natyashastra* on the basis of the principles of balance, opposition and consistent-inconsistency. He also discussed how the systems of the *Natyashastra* could provide insights and a new lease of life to today's performances. His second presentation was on '*Abhinaya as described in the Natyashastra and Cognitive Neuroscience*'. He outlined an ambitious project of investigating the neurological effects of the physical gesticulations described in the *Natyashastra* on the performers. This would involve the use of science and theory to support practical tools for contextualising theatre practices. He emphasised the need to de-mystify the systems of the *Natyashastra* and view them in the context of developments in cognitive neuroscience, with studies at the intersection of biology and cognition.

I now think that perhaps Bhole did not mean to reject the *Natyashastra* as such (as he threatened in the inaugural session). Possibly he just wanted to question the mythological aura and glorification of the *Natyashastra*. Sri Maha Lakshmi presented her paper titled, "*Natyashastra as a Pañcamaveda*", while Akhila Vimal, in her paper "*Pañcamaveda: Heterogeneity and the Problematic of*

Spectatorship of Asuras and Śūdras” discussed the idea of othering and subaltern discourse in the *Natyashastra*.

The demonstration-cum-lectures were very exciting. Medini Hombal gave a demonstration-cum-lecture on the preliminaries that used to be performed before the start of any play. The performance of Bharatantyam by Sonal Nimbkar was an example of the combination of classical grandeur with innovative skills. Sujata Mohan in her demonstration-cum-lecture showed how the adoption of the techniques of *abhinaya* from the *Natyashastra* led to evolution of the new form of Bharatanrityam by Padma Subrahmanyam, her guru.

It was already 7 September, the last day of the school. I had come to the last chapter of the *Natyashatra* – and was reading the last line of the *Natyashastra* by Bharata, which says – “Whatever that has been left out by me, Kohala – one of my disciples – will deal with it in a sequel to my text.” Explaining the line and briefly introducing Kohala, finally I was telling the gathering – “I have tried to explain the *Natyashastra* to you in the best possible way I could... despite my limitations...’

Something very unexpected happened as I said this. All the participants arose clapping, and they continued clapping for nearly two minutes. I was somewhat overwhelmed and taken aback, managing to utter only “oh no!” – or something like that in a confused tone. I was aware of their appreciation and the sympathetic hearing they had given to me during the past thirteen days, but frankly I had not expected such a standing ovation from them.

In the valedictory session held in the afternoon of 7 September 2014, participants narrated experiences of benefit from the School. Fortunately, Bharat Gupt was still here from among the resource persons. I had requested him to speak at the valedictory. He described the School as an event of historical importance. Presenting the resume, I hoped that the outcome of the School would gradually come to reflect in redesigning of the syllabi of various courses in departments of performing arts, literature, drama, aesthetics and theatre; and that this would hopefully lead to a reconstruction of Indian aesthetics and a re-organisation of the methods of actor-training. Vidyanand Jha, Shakir Tasnim, Sujata Mohan and Pravin Bhole spoke as representatives of the participants and as expected they said very generous things about the entire School. Chetan Singh especially came for the valedictory of our school, as the Institute was closed for Saturday. He emphasised the need for organising such schools in a wider cross-cultural perspective.

The School of *Natyashastra* had come an end. But then, it is not the end.

Coming out of the conference room of Siddhartha Vihar, the venue of the Autumn School, I felt utterly exhausted. I wished to just put aside the notes and reading materials assiduously prepared for the school for some time, and from tomorrow onwards, if not from today, return to my project work as a Fellow of the Institute. I wanted to forget the school of *Natyashatra*. It must have been a great event, but I had a life beyond it... so I must now get on with it!

But will Bharatamuni allow me to do that? He continues to come back to me. The memories of the school also continue to come back. I may remember all the participants of this school till the end of this life of mine, like the students of the earliest days of my lecturership at University. There were two research scholars from JNU amongst the participants of the school – both young women. One of them was outspoken and very talkative, the other somewhat reserved, always speaking in hushed tones. I will remember both of them for their verbosity as well as silence. In fact, the latter did not speak during the entire course of the school at all, even though I allowed considerable liberty to the participants to speak out and put up questions during my sessions and as a result there was also some loose talking. But this research scholar was the only one to remain silent. Was her silence a comment on the functioning of the school? I will remember Shiv Shankar Pathak for his resounding voice and the way he demonstrated dialogue deliveries of some of the characters in the Sanskrit plays he had performed – he could become an Amarish Puri, if not a Shombhu Mitra. I will remember Manoj Mishra for rediscovering his talent in music, and Vidyanand Jha, now for his Maithili Poetry and also added appreciation for his magnanimity as a person.

Most of the participants of the school have been contacting me over the several months after the School; but I have now lost the trail of contact with Vidyanand Jha and Pravin Bhole. Obviously, both of them are very busy, and like the younger participants, may not have time to write to me; or perhaps they may also want to forget about the school just as I had wanted after the valedictory; or was the school eventually not worthwhile enough for them? These and many other question will remain unresolved – and in their being un-explicit, Bharatamuni will be coming back to me again.