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Contextualizing Rāmavijaya Within and Beyond the Tradition of Indian Dramaturgy, as Prescribed by the Nāṭyaśāstra

KAUSHIKY HAZRA

ABSTRACT

The Indian performative space is a diverse and varied one. Historically and culturally, there have coexisted various forms of performances, be it the Sanskrit classical plays or the traditional performances emerging from the local or the community. Central to the aesthetics of Indian theatre and performance laid the 2000- year-old Nāṭyaśāstra, often compared to Aristotle's Poetics. This paper will examine one such traditional

performance, Rāmavijaya, belonging to the tradition of Ankiyabhaona in medieval Assam and will locate it within the context of the Nāṭyaśāstra, the canonical guidebook to Indian dramaturgy. Abstract in inglese (max. 500 battute spazi inclusi)

KEYWORDS: *Indian Performance, Nāṭyaśāstra, Rāmavijaya, Ankiyabhaona*

AUTORE

Kaushiky Hazra is a student of Comparative Literature at Jadavpur University, India. She is currently pursuing her post-graduation in the same and is in the first year of her curriculum. Her research interests include performance studies, fantasy literature, travel writing, post-colonial literature, and oriental studies.

kaushikyhazra@gmail.com

From Kalidasa's *Abhijanashakuntalam* to any present-day theatre performance, Indian performance has traversed a long way, and very evidently so, Indian performance is not one-dimensional but comprises of a varied way of performances, enactment, etc. Whether it is the Sanskrit natakas or ritualistic performances, each field has historically often overlapped with each other, and co-existed simultaneously. Integral to this world of Indian dramaturgy is the almost-2000 year old text of *Nāṭyaśāstra*, ascribed to Bharata Muni. A pragmatic, prescriptive guidebook to the Indian way of performances, it has long since served as the one most significant text, be it for the sutradharas or the modern day directors, or any performer for that matter.

Within this tradition of Indian dramaturgy, traditional performances occupy a unique space. With its existence and evolution in the various nooks and corners of India, these "little traditions" consist of local and linguistic aspirations unique to that region.¹ The Ankiyabhaonas of Assam, as performed and based upon the Ankiyanats composed by the Indian scholar and Hindu saint Sankaradeva (1449-1568) and his disciple Madhavadeva are also no different. However, despite being a traditional performance and imbibing local flavor, the Ankiyabhaonas also uphold many classical features as prescribed by the *Nāṭyaśāstra*, be its staging of the preliminaries or the purbaranga or the costumes and head-gear worn by the actors. Sankaradeva's *Ramavijaya* is one of such Ankiyanats and when performed, a careful eye can place it in the tradition of Indian dramaturgy as prescribed by Bharata's *Nāṭyaśāstra*. However there is a continuous inflow between the local and the classical within it and due to this dynamic, it often adheres to local aspirations and goes beyond the *Nāṭyaśāstra*.

The *Ramavijaya*, the last play composed by Sankaradeva, and like other Ankiyanats, was composed as an act of devotion to god. A sacrosanct text to the people of Assam, it is preserved, revered, and treated as the manifestation of the godhead. Inspired and influenced by the *Bhagavat Purana*, the idea of the Upanishads, and the monotheistic philosophies of the Vedas, the *Ramavijaya* and its predecessor Ankiyanats had a didactic and moralistic impulse to it, as it tried to inculcate Bhakti devotion and philosophies in an attempt to homogenize a medieval heterogeneous Assam. Still existing today and performed inside a Naamghar facing the Manikut, the *Ramavijaya* would enact several episodes of the Rama-katha or the exploits of Rama, be it his Haradhanuvanga, the killing of Tataka, etc.

One of the first ways in which the *Nāṭyaśāstra* applies to the *Ramavijaya* is through the functioning of the rasas in the bhaona. While *Nāṭyaśāstra* has no mention of the Bhakti rasa, one cannot simply deny that the principle rasa in *Ramavijaya*,

¹ *Speaking of Siva*. United Kingdom: Penguin Books Limited, 2014.

which is to invite people's love and devotion for god, would be the rasa of Bhakti. Since Bhakti rasa doesn't find a mention in Bharata's text, a close second can be the Shanta rasa. However, other dramatic elements in the bhaona make use of other rasas also, like the Vira rasa or the adbhuta rasa. Since, Ramavijaya also had the purpose of a spectacle, as evident from its musical nature and performance, it had to incorporate various other elements from the *Nāṭyaśāstra*. Such a spectacle can be achieved only through the other rasas, although they remain secondary and Bhakti rasa as the primary rasa. The manifestation of this Bhakti rasa was primarily due to the utterances of the devotional Sanskrit slokas, also called the bijas. For instance, Ramavijaya's very opening is composed of a sloka:

prathama sloka || yannamakhila lokasokasamanam yannama premaspadam
papaparapayodhitaranabidhau yannamapmaplavah |
yannamasravanat punati svapacah prapnoti moksam ksitau
tam sriramamaham mahesabaradam vande sada sadaram ||²

Moreover, according to the tradition of the *Nāṭyaśāstra*, Ramavijaya begins with an invocation to the godhead Krishna, "namo bhagavate srikrsnaya |" thus signifying the devotional and spiritual aspect of the whole play.³

The next most significant aspect of *Ramavijaya* is its Purbaranga, a direct continuation, and adherence to the *Nāṭyaśāstra's* prescriptions. Even before the play opens, there is a long session of various preliminaries, performed in due order that may continue for long hours. Accompanied by the playing of drums, cymbals, known as dhemalis, and along with some recitatives like the pathyo, there would be various categories within the purbaranga itself. *Nāṭyaśāstra's* dedicated chapter on the preliminaries describes some of these in sloka 12-15 as: " Then after removing the curtain, dances and recitals are to be performed with the playing of all musical instruments, and some songs of the Madraka class is to be sung, or one of the Vardhamanaka class along with the class dance (suitable t it) should be applied, then should take place (one after another) during the preliminaries the following: Utthapana, Walking round, Benediction, Suskapakrsta, Rangadvara, Cari, Mahacari, Three Men's talk, and Laudation." The Ankiyabhaona Ramavijaya observes many of these before the performance even starts and one can comprehend the seriousness of the performance from all these minute rituals. Furthermore, there is a long list of other continuing ceremonies within the preliminaries, which particularly focus on the musical component of the play. Performing them in due order is also integral to the ethos of

² Yashodhara Medhi and Śaṅkaradeva, *The Plays of śaṅkaradeva: Introduction, Life and Works, All His Six Plays with Transliterated Text and English Translation*, n.d, 410.

³ *Ibid.*

the performance and the belief of the people. For instance, there would be the arrangement of musical instruments called the Pratyahara, the seating of singers called the Avatarana, the commencement of vocal exercise or the Arambha, the adjusting of musical instruments or Asravana, the rehearsal of different styles of playing or Vaktrapani, after which the strings of instruments would be arranged called as Parighattana. Next, there would be the rehearsing of different hand poses or samghotana, the playing together of drums and stringed instruments called Margasarita, the following Asarita that is to practice the beat, and the final Gitavidhi or the application of songs praising the glorious god. Integral to the performance of Ramavijaya is also the Benediction, also known as the Nandi which involves the blessings of the gods, the Brahmins, and the kings. For instance, one of the benedictory songs in translation goes like: “Glory to Rama, who is like the life for (the living entities) the world, I offer my prayers falling down at your feet.”⁴

As mentioned and found in *Nāṭyaśāstra*, the usage of curtains is also evident in the staging of Ramavijaya. Whether it is the entry of the Sutradhara or a character like Dasaratha or Ravana, the curtain is used for the purpose of creating a spectacle. Oftentimes modern-day Ankiyabhaonas see accompanying fireworks that would occur simultaneously with the dropping of the curtain. This idea pertains to the creation of the spectacular on the stage, an element that *Nāṭyaśāstra* also focuses upon through various means, and particularly the ways of the representation through Abhinaya, namely the Angika, Vachika, Aharya, Sattvika. The Vachika, which relates to verbal expression or dialogues and monologues, can be very distinctly identified in *Ramavijaya* through the speeches of the Sutradhara, another important figure responsible for maintaining the whole performance. For instance, the Sutradhara can be often seen directly addressing the audience and inciting their attention and further explaining why they should watch this performance. *Nāṭyaśāstra* calls this as Prarochana and for which the Sutradhara becomes solely responsible. The figure of the Sutradhara is an important one as prescribed by the *Nāṭyaśāstra*, but he still had its limitations in the classical natakas, whereas, in the Ankiyabhaonas, he functions as the central figure of the play. Rarely leaving the stage, he would be seen dictating terms on characters, narrating the events, leading the chorus as well as the musicians. Thus through the Vachika (verbal expression), and Angika (enactment with body parts) and also the Aharya (costumes, makeup, props), the Sutradhara would lead the whole performance. For instance, in Ramavijaya, the Sutradhara can be seen saying the following: “Oh dear people look at the sufferings of the love-sick men without devotion to Hari. They do not know that the daughter of Janaka is the

⁴ Ibid, 382.

mother of this whole world; knowing it, keep chanting the name of Hari incessantly.”⁵ This is a direct address to the audience and also asks them to chant the name of Hari, i.e. to do Naam-Gaan, which is a repetition of the lord’s name. Everything is also tied up to showcase the devotion to God and the spectacle also acts as a kind of darshana for the spectators.

The Aharya way of representation as mentioned in the *Nāṭyaśāstra* that is through costumes headgear and makeup or prop is also distinctly visible within the Ankiyabhaona. For instance, there are different dresses for different characters, be it the Sutradhara or Krishna. Headgears such as Pag, Paguri, Mukut, Kiriti are also worn with respect to their characters. The Sutradhara can also be seen wearing ornaments such as Kanphuli or Lokapara, while the demonic and villainous characters can be often seen wearing masks such as Cho or Sanjeeva, made with the leaf of areca nut tree or thermocol for modern-day performances. Elaborating on the costumes, scholar Anansha Borthakur writes in her paper, ‘Ankiya Nata and Bhaona in the context of Bharata’s *Nāṭyaśāstra* that:

The costumes of Ankiya Baona are quite distinctive. For instance, the costume of the Sutradhara is unisexual. The Sutradhara wears a loose jacketed vest on the upper part of body. This jacketed vest is properly known as Jlikota Chola as there is a netting added and sewn above the open-chest cloth vest. The Ghuri or Lahanga worn by the Sutradhara is a type of petticoat that reaches up to the ankles. A silver-made waist-band called Karadhani used to be put up by the Sutradhara around the waist. Over and above all these, the Sutradhara hangs two long pieces of clothes from his two shoulders down to knees, taken through under the Karadhani or Tangali.⁶

All these play a crucial role in the performance since the idea is to create a spectacle. The storyline has already been assimilated by the audience and it is only for the spectacle or the darshana, that they flock in large numbers to witness the performance.

Crucial to the *Nāṭyaśāstra* is also the designated space of the performance or the prekshagriha. The *Nāṭyaśāstra* mentions three types of playhouses, namely Vikrsta, Caturasra and Tryasra, each varying in shape and size and gives utmost significance to the sacred space. However, in the performance of the Ankiyabhaona *Ramavijaya*, the performance space is unique of its own. It consists of the Naamghar which is a long rectangular stretch, and whereby the audience would sit on the two sides and

⁵ Ibid, 464.

⁶ Anansha Borthakur, “Ankiya Nata and Bhaona in the Context of Bharata's Natyashastra,” Academia.edu, March 2, 2020, https://www.academia.edu/42123470/Ankiya_Nata_and_Bhaona_in_the_context_of_Bharatas_Natyashastra.

in rows. It would also be held facing the Manikut, where the sacred Ankiyanat text would be kept.

While *Nāṭyaśāstra* is integral in *Ramavijaya*'s understanding, one cannot also overlook the local elements that impart an essence unique to the region. Thus while contextualizing and placing *Ramavijaya* within the tradition of the *Nāṭyaśāstra*, one also needs to look beyond the confinement of Bharat Muni's text. Firstly, the performance is held mostly in Brajabuli or Ahamiya or for that matter in Kamrupi, but the songs and lyrics are taken from Vaishnava and pre-Vaishnava authors. Secondly, unlike the classical natakas, a lot of physical activity is shown on the stage, like the anointment of bodies, physical killings, amorous dalliances etc. There is the incorporation of other local performances such as the old puppet dancing of Assam or the local tradition of Ojhapali. Moreover, one can also trace the abundant usage of Kathasutras and Bhatimas used within the Ankiyanats. The Kathasutra generally implies dialogue, and the Bhatimas are more of a eulogy or praise of godheads. Within the *Ramavijaya*, one can mainly find the use of Debabhatima and Natabhatimas. The *Ramavijaya* has many instances of Natabhatima where the Sutradhara can be seen eulogizing Rama, or other characters like Sita. One of the bhatimas eulogizing Rama goes as:

sunā sakhi bacana svarupa | ki kahaba ramaka rupa ||
 syama muruti pitabasa | ghanajaca bijuri bikasa ||
 mastaka chatraka besa | nila kuncita kesa ||
 rucikara karna atula | nasa nila tila phula ||⁷

It translates to:

Oh dear friend, listen to these pleasing words; what to speak of the beauty of Rama. The dark body with yellow clothing looks like lightning flashing brightly on the cloud. The head with blue curly hair is like an umbrella; the charming ears are incomparable and the nose is like blue sesame flower.⁸

Lastly, the Natabhatimas also seek deliverance for the assembled audience at the end of the performance, thus again returning to the idea of Bhakti. Hence, even though Ankiyanats are greatly influenced by Sanskrit texts and the *Nāṭyaśāstra*, with Sankaradeva himself being interested in Sanskrit dramaturgy, he still instilled local flavors so that the audience would be able to understand and identify themselves

⁷ Yashodhara Medhi and Śaṅkaradeva, *The Plays of śaṅkaradeva: Introduction, Life and Works, All His Six Plays with Transliterated Text and English Translation*, n.d, 475.

⁸ *Ibid.*

with the performances. Thus, although it adheres to the *Nāṭyaśāstra* at various moments, it retained the freedom to divert from it and resulting in an interaction of both the classical and the local.

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