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LYNE BANSAT-BOUDON

The Foundation Myth of the Indian Theatre

The purpose of this study is to deal with the foundation myth of the theatre as presented in the *Nāṭyaśāstra*. There are two periods to this narrative upon which the treatise at once opens and closes, as if to subdue – through the beauties of the narration – the all-theoretical severity of the exposition: while chapter I evokes a god creating the theatre at the request of another god concerned about the mortals' welfare, chapters XXXVI and XXXVII – the closing ones – narrate the setting up of the theatre on earth, for the pleasure of mankind as well as its education.

The *Nāṭyaśāstra*, the supreme authority of dramatic art, is itself but the secularized and codified form of the *Nāṭyaveda*, that knowledge of the theatre which the Gods, led by Indra, have besought Brahmā to create so as to remedy the disorders of the world. Chapter I, in effect, opens on the vision of an unsettled world constrained to bear up with its uncertain fate of happiness and grief¹. The Gods – and the first of them, Indra, their king – get alarmed. To Indra's mind, such disorder is due to the ignorance in which part of the population – the text refers to the *śūdras* but the term undoubtedly represents women as well² – is maintained by being banned the access to the Veda and consequently to the rules and values whose observance is the absolute guarantee for the proper working of society.

Since the fourfold Veda can only be an object of study for the male members of three upper classes (these *dvijas* or twice-born ones who add to their biological birth the cultural one given to them by the initiation without which no study of

¹ See NŚ [= *Nāṭyaśāstra*] I 9–10. Though sometimes at the cost of a few corrections, we shall constantly refer to the Parimal edition (*Nāṭyaśāstra* of Bharatamuni with the commentary *Abhinavabhāratī*. Ed. by R. S. Nagar. Delhi/Ahmedabad: Parimal Publications, 1981–1984. 4 vol. (Parimal Sanskrit Series, 4).

² In effect there are numerous instances of assimilation between women and *śūdras*. Besides, there is a lot of evidence to the presence of women in theatre performances. See NŚ XXVII 61a and NŚ XXXIV prose after 221. In literature, act III of *Priyadarśikā*, and act II of *Mālavikāgnimitra* respectively show Vāsavadattā and Dhārinī witnessing a performance. Nowadays, in the Bhojpuri region, although women must not be present during the reciting of the epics, they are allowed to attend performances.

the Vedic text is possible), let the creation of a fifth Veda, accessible to all men and women, take place. Such is the remedy Indra is thinking of. Such is the wish he voices before Brahmā. And it is as a king that he thus addresses the creator among the Gods, for the sovereign's duty is to ensure the preservation of the *dharmā* – the cosmic and social order – as well as the happiness and wealth of his subjects.

As a matter of fact, I have, with that narrative, reconstructed the whole of the ideological discourse devoted by the *Nāṭyaśāstra* to the intellectual creation which is the theatre. Directly articulating Indra's request upon the evocation of a world given up to the *adharma*, the foundation myth is indeed more elliptical, and the restitution of the missing link is my personal interpretation: Indra's idea is that the disorder of the should be remedied through the generalisation of knowledge.

However, why does the fifth Veda incarnate as the theatre? And ultimately, what is the theatre? Here is the answer of the *Nāṭyaśāstra* to those questions:

“Led by great Indra, thus did the Gods address Pitāmaha: ‘We want something to be played (*krīḍanīyaka*), something to be seen and heard (*drśyaṃ śravyam ca*). There is no possible access to this Veda for the caste of *śūdras* by whom it can't be heard. So, do create another fifth Veda aimed for all classes’.”³

It is an important text in so far as it directly defines the theatre as a game, and as it includes the drama within the range of all possible games. Besides, if the myth justifies the creation of the theatre by the necessity to educate the whole mankind, it is only implicitly – as demonstrated above – and moreover, secondarily. Actually, what the myth chooses to emphasize, is the ludic dimension of this theatre, what it first designates is the pleasure the spectator is to derive from it. Thus does Indra's wish, formulated in two sequences – We want something to be played ... So, do create a fifth Veda – potentially contain the quasi totality of Indian reasonings on the theatre: pleasure and instruction are the two aims given to the drama, but what the theatre is mainly concerned with is pleasure, and it is through pleasure that the other goal, instruction, will be reached.

Brahmā, the omniscient, complies with the request, borrowing from the first four Vedas the fourfold subject matter of a fifth one: the *R̥gveda*, the *Sāmaveda* and the *Yajurveda* respectively provide him with the text (*pāṭhya*), the song (*gīta*) and the acting (*abhinaya*), while from the *Atharva* he derives the eight Flavours (*rasa*)⁴.

³ NŚ I 11–12: *mabendrapramukhair devair uktah kila pitāmahaḥ | krīḍanīyakam icchāmo drśyaṃ śravyam ca yad bhavet || na vedavyavahāro 'yaṃ samśrāvyaḥ śūdrajātiṣu | tasmāt sṛjāparam vedam pañcamam sārvaṅnikam ||*

⁴ NŚ I 17: *jagrāha pāṭhyam rgvedāt sāmabhyo gītam eva ca | yajurvedād abhinayān rasān ātharvaṇād api ||*
The term *rasa* literally means “juice, sap, essence, flavour”. In the singular, *rasa* designates

The theatre is born, responding to the twofold request voiced by Indra: it is the fifth Veda, the essence of the other four, which is to restore the *dharmā* by teaching mankind the founding values of Brahminic society and the necessity there is to discriminate between good and evil⁵. Consisting of text, song, acting and flavours, it is also that object of play, to be seen and heard, which was being called for by the Gods in order to provide instruction through entertainment. And there is no better recreation, no more immediate teaching than a show which charms the eye as much as the ear.

Therefore, how is it that theatre intended for men was first performed in the Gods' abode? It is true, as is told in the *Nāṭyaśāstra*, that "the Gods never take so much delight in receiving the homage of incense and garlands as in enjoying the bliss which always goes with the drama performances"⁶. Likewise, no sacrifice can truly compare with them⁷. Thus can one understand the God's desire to reserve, at least for a while, the theatre for their private use.

But there is another explanation which goes beyond this aesthete's attitude, indissociable from a certain selfishness. The outset of the theatre is, in effect, difficult, as is testified by the introductory narrative which not only deals with the swift attacks launched against it by the Asuras' forces⁸, but also with the hesitating attempts which accompany its setting up, as well as the imperfections the first performances are stained with. That is why it is only by the end of chapter four – after Śiva has both advised Bharata to introduce the dance into the drama's performance and instructed Taṇḍu to inform the Muni of its principles – that the theatre begins to take the final shape which will be its at the end of Bharata's exposition.

Once the rules of the theatre had been laid down, they still remained to be implemented. Then, from what is disclosed by the narrative of the first chapters of the *Nāṭyaśāstra*, everything happens as if the God's abode were the most appropriate place for the experimenting of a dramatic art still in its infancy:

aesthetic pleasure; in the plural, its different modes of realisation which are subject to the character given by the author to the entire work or to some moment in it. The *Nāṭyaśāstra* lists eight *rasas* – the Amorous, the Comic, the Pathetic, the Furious, the Heroic, the Terrible, the Odious, the Marvellous – presented as the transmutation in the aesthetic register of the eight permanent psychic dispositions (*sthāyibhāva*) which, according to Indian theories, sum up the whole human psychology.

⁵ Instruction (*vyutpatti*) is truly one of the two objects of the drama, the other being pleasure (*rasa*). In effect, the theatre, as in repeatedly asserted, teaches men they should behave like Rāma rather than like Rāvaṇa: *rāmādivad vartitavyam na rāvaṇādivat* (Mammaṭa, *Kāvya prakāśa* I 2). See *Abhinavabhāratī ad NŚ IV 263–264*.

⁶ NŚ XXXVII 29: *na tathā gandhamālyena devās tasyanti pūjitāḥ | yathā nāṭyaprayogasthair nityam tasyanti maṅgalaiḥ ||*

⁷ The comparison between theatre and sacrifice is a frequent one: after all, isn't the sacrifice an activity as precisely regulated as is the dramatic performance in India? See NŚ V 108 and *Mālavikāgnimitra*, act I, stanza 4 (quoted and translated *infra*, n. 34) where Kālidāsa defines the theatre as a *kānta kratu*, a sacrifice which is an enchantment for the Gods.

⁸ See NŚ I 64–75.

heaven is the place where the theatre meant for men acquires its necessary improvements.

There the Gods are first and foremost the spectators of themselves, as the dramas performed before their eyes find their subject matter in their own achievements or in the story of their lives, while the playwrights are Brahmā himself or Sarasvatī and the actors the graceful company of the Apsaras.

What the first performance brings on stage before the assembly of the Gods and Daityas is the struggle which once took place between them⁹. What is later presented by the Muni before Śiva's eyes is a *samavakāra* entitled *The Churning of the Ambrosian Ocean*¹⁰, followed by a *ḍima* – *The Tripura Burning*¹¹ –, both of which are Brahmā's own writings.

In a different register there was also, at the outset of this theatre, the performance of *The Lakṣmī's Svayaṃvara*¹², during which Urvaśī, confused by the passion inspired to her by King Purūravas, a mortal, spoke out the name of her beloved instead of Puruṣottama – the name of Viṣṇu¹³.

We know that the whole story of Purūravas and Urvaśī's thwarted love, as it is narrated by Kālidāsa, originates from this episode. But, above all, we know what the human theatre owes to this blunder made on the divine stage: after all, it was as a punishment for this fault that Urvaśī was exiled to earth, and given the opportunity to live there for some time by her lover's side. That is how she came to bring the theatre to the king's court. That is how a very young prince was enchanted at its discovery and how, later on, in his maturity – once he was being entertained as a guest by the Gods – he could find no rest until he was allowed to re-establish in his earthly abode that art whose knowledge had died out almost from the moment when it had settled¹⁴.

That very young prince, who has become a powerful king, is Nahuṣa,

⁹ See NŚ I 56–58.

¹⁰ The *Amṛtamanthana* is referred to in NŚ IV 2–3.

¹¹ The *Tripuradāha* is referred to in NŚ IV 10.

¹² The *Lakṣmīsvayaṃvara*, a work by Sarasvatī, is known to us through the *Padmapurāṇa* and, still more, through *Vikramorvaśī*.

¹³ *Vikramorvaśī* (*viṣkambhaka* of act III)

¹⁴ See NŚ XXXVII 9–10: *pitāmahagrhe śmābhir etad antahpure jane | pitāmahakriyāyuktam urvaśyām sampravartitam || tasyāḥ praṇāśāsokena unmādotparate nṛpe | vipanne' nāhpurajane punar nāsam upāgatam ||*

“That [theatre] which – in Pitāmaha's abode – I [a mortal] seized, [that theatre], created by Pitāmaha, was put into practice in my grandfather's house, among the women of the harem, in Urvaśī's presence. When she disappeared, the king went mad with grief. The women of the harem were struck by this as by a misfortune and, in its turn, the theatre came to be destroyed.” The sanskrit text has been corrected in keeping with the commentary by Abhinavagupta who teaches, besides, that the understanding of *kārikā* 9 requires the previous reference to *labdham*, the verbal adjective of *kārikā* 8: “That theatre which I seized ...” Abhinavagupta has also been the authority of reference for the translation in which the term *pitāmaha* either represents Pitāmaha himself, that is Brahmā, or Nahuṣa's grandfather: Purūravas. Hence, the *śleṣa* signaled by the exegete has been restituted: *pitāmahagrhe* means both “in Pitāmaha's abode” and “in my grandfather's house”.

Purūravas' grandson. The closing chapter of the *Nāṭyaśāstra* reveals that, finding again in heaven the theatre he once loved with such passion, Nahuṣa comes to the Gods and beseeches them to allow its implementation on earth in his own abode:

“Having folded his hands, the king, who wished to have it performed, said to the Gods: ‘Let the theatre, associated as it is to the Apsaras, be performed in my house’.”¹⁵

He is answered that he should forget all about the Apsaras, as men are not allowed to get acquainted with these women of a divine nature¹⁶. As for the theatrical practice, however, it is within Bharata's province¹⁷. The Muni – before whom Nahuṣa presents himself – all more readily complies with his request as he finds in it an opportunity to free his sons from the malediction they have just been struck by. In effect, telling how men enjoyed in their turn the privilege to be initiated to the theatre and its rules – and it is truly an initiation, as indicated by the very heading of the chapter entitled *guhyaṭattva-kathanādhyāya* – that last narrative adjusts itself upon another one which constitutes the subject matter of the preceding chapter¹⁸. There, the Sages, shaking with fury, have been seen casting a terrible curse on Bharata's sons which sentences them – for mocking their elders¹⁹ – to be deprived of their Brahmin's status and which downgrades them, together with their line of descent, to the rank of *śūdras*²⁰.

Their father, to whom they turn in order to cry out their bitterness and anger²¹ appeases them with these words: should they transmit to others the art of drama, their action should then be considered sufficient atonement (*prāyaścitta*) for their fault:

“I would also have you know that we must offer this theatre initiated by Brahṁa to some other students through the teaching of its practice [...]. Once you have bequeathed this theatre, according to rule, as we once received it from the Apsaras' mouths, then you will have fully atoned for your fault.”²²

¹⁵ NŚXXXVII 4: *kṛtāñjaliḥ prayogārtham proktavāms tu surān nṛpaḥ | ॐ apsarobhir idam sārḍham nāṭyam bhavatu me grhe ||*

¹⁶ See NŚ XXXVII 6.

¹⁷ See NŚ XXXVII 7.

¹⁸ The colophon of the NŚ gives, in effect, *nāṭyaśāpādhyāya*: “Chapter of the curse cast against the theatre”, as the heading for chapter XXXVI. Let us note that the colophon of the commentary gives a variant: *naṭaśāpādhyāya*: “Chapter of the curse cast against the actors”.

¹⁹ As a matter of fact, Bharata's sons have attempted to ridicule the *ṛsis*; in some farces (*prahasana*), they have worked to their abasement by unduly attributing to them an immoral and lustful behaviour.

²⁰ See NŚ XXXVI 35sqq.

²¹ See NŚ XXXVI 45.

²² NŚ XXXVI 48 et 50: *jānīdvaṃ tat tathā nāṭyam brahmaṇā sampravartitam | śiṣyebhyaś ca tad anyebhyaḥ prayacchāmāḥ prayogataḥ || [...] apsarobhya idam caiva yathātattvaṃ yathāśrutam || ॐ nāṭyam dattvā tataḥ sarve prāyaścittam carisyathā ||*

Manomohan Ghosh provides a different interpretation of this passage. He gives the following translation:

“Remember (lit. know) that this dramatic art has been described by Brahman [himself]. So teach it to your disciples and others through its practice.

After holding the performance of a drama according to [rules] which I have heard from Apsarasas, you are to undergo a purificatory ceremony (*prāyaścitta*).”²³

My interpretation has, in my view, the advantage of accounting for the inner consistency of both episodes: that of the malediction and that of the descent of drama to earth. Furthermore, Bharata’s promise to his sons of a possible expiation for their fault is the closing episode of chapter 36²⁴, while chapter 37 opens with the figure of king Nahuṣa who brings the opportunity for the announced atonement²⁵.

Besides, what follows in the text further corroborates my interpretation. In this passage Bharata thus addresses his sons:

“Here is king Nahuṣa who has come to us with folded hands to voice this request: ‘Go down to earth together, all of you, so that drama be put in practice there’”.²⁶

And the Muni concludes:

“As for us, we shall put an end to the malediction when that theatre has been initiated according to rule. That way, you will not be despised by Brahmins and kings.”²⁷

A close look at the arrangement of the text makes it quite clear that the subject of the last two chapters is the advent of the theatre among men thanks to the transmission of the corpus of rules which organizes it. An advent presented by the mythical narration as an absolute necessity since only at this cost will the Bharatidae be freed from the malediction which hangs above them: such is the justification of chapter 36, the *Nāṭyaśāpādhyāya*.

Therefore, in order that the theatre may go down²⁸ from heaven to earth and

²³ In M. Ghosh’s translation (vol. II, p. 234), the reference is to NŚ XXXVI 49–51.

²⁴ See NŚ XXXVI 48–50 quoted *supra* n. 22.

²⁵ See NŚ XXXVII 1.

²⁶ NŚ XXXVII 14: *ayaṃ hi nahuṣo rājā yācate naḥ kṛtāñjalib|gamyatām sahitair bhūmiṃ prayoktum nāṭyam eva ca||*

²⁷ NŚ XXXVII 15: *karisyāmas ca śāpāntam asmin samyak prayojite|brāhmaṇānām nrpaṇām ca bhaviyatha na kutsitāb||*

²⁸ The text uses the verbal adjective of *sam-ava-tṛ*, which only exists in the causative form, and in which one can recognize the root *ava-tṛ* “to go down”, from which the substantive *avatāra* “descent, incarnation” is derived. In chapter XXXVI, *kārikā* 31a, it is the verbal adjective of *ava-tṛ* which is used: *yathāvatāritam caiva nāṭyam etan mahītale|*

find its accomplishment among men, it will have been necessary to combine the nostalgia of a king once bewitched in childhood by the spells of drama with the insolence of young men ready to mock the *ṛṣī* themselves – however formidable they are, as is shown by the wrath with which they immediately crush the reckless Bharatidae.

This seems to be a beautiful symbol of what may be considered as two of the main functions of the theatre: to fill one with wonder, but also to challenge and question, if only through the means of laughter whenever staged in farce or in comedy.

The Bharatidae only stayed with mortals long enough to teach them the art of the theatre, get married, and beget children. Once their expiatory work accomplished, they returned to heaven²⁹. But they had had sons, begetting a lineage of actors – the *bharatas*³⁰ – scrupulously respectful of the dramatic rules of which Brahmā had conceived the substance before entrusting the Muni with the task of formulating them and putting them into practice³¹.

Recalling the question which was formerly put, one can see that the Gods no more opposed the first descent of the theatre among mortals – namely at Purūravas and Urvaśī's court – than they reject, some time later, Nahuṣa's prayer. It seems they were only expecting, to trust the theatre into human hands, that the request should be put to them³². And once again, it is a king who fulfils the task.

This divine-originated theatre reaching down to them is immediately appropriated by men: human actors trained by the Bharatidae take the Apsaras' place and perform the stories of their heroic deeds, stories still travelled through by the Gods, now and again, as is allowed by the Indian imaginary.

As for the Gods, their pleasure is not interrupted for all this change: they let themselves be charmed by the show of mortals just as they were once charmed by themselves and their own productions³³. Much more, their pleasure gets richer for the specifically human dimension acquired by this drama that they have

alternately with the verbal adjective of *pat* "to fall down" (NŚ XXXVI 13b): *katham urvītale nātyam svargān nipatitam vibho* ||

²⁹ See NŚ XXXVII 22.

³⁰ Other instances of this term may be noted in the NŚ, especially in XIII 65. Kane remarks in "History of Sanskrit Poetics", p. 27, that this use is ancient. This is confirmed by the *Yājñavalkyaśmṛti* III 161 (1st or 2nd century). The *Bhāvaprakāśana* gives an etymology of the vocable (p. 285, 1.18): *tān abravīm nātyavedaṃ bharateti pitāmahaḥ* "Pitāmaha said to them: 'carry the *Nātyaveda*'"

See also S. Lévi, *Le Théâtre indien*, p. 311–312.

³¹ See NŚ XXXVII 23

³² On this point, I must disagree with the opinion of M. C. Byrski (*Concept of Ancient Indian Theatre*) who denies any consistency to the narrative devoted by the NŚ – firstly in chapter I, then in chapters XXXVI and XXXVII – to these genesis of the theatre.

³³ See *Mālavikāgnimitra*, act I, stanza 4: *devānām idam āmananti munayah kāntam kratum cākṣuṣam* [...] "It [the theatre] is to the Gods, as attested by the Sages, a sacrifice which they like to behold".

helped to initiate and which they had always intended for the instruction of mankind.

For, in effect, what did they want to create but a theatre in the world's image so that, containing as it would the whole range of human attitudes to be seen at one glance³⁴, it would enable men to separate the wheat from the tares, that is to elaborate a moral in keeping with Brahminic orthodoxy?

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³⁴ See NŚ I 112: *nānābhāvopasaṃpannam nānāvasthāntarātmakam|lokravṛttānukaranam nāṭyam etan mayā kṛtam* || "Endowed with all possible feelings, constituted of the most varied situations, thus have I made that theatre as an imitation of human behaviours."

Also NŚ I 107 and NŚ I 117.