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A study of social life and institutions reflected in the *Nāṭyaśāstra*

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Abstract:

The Nāṭyaśāstra of Bharata is an important text not only for dramaturgy but also for understanding ancient Indian social life. Though Bharata does not directly describe social institutions, various scattered references help us reconstruct the social structure of his time. This paper examines the varṇa system, āśrama system, family organisation, position of women, marriage, crime, and religious practices as reflected in the Nāṭyaśāstra. The study shows that although the varṇa system existed, its rigidity was considerably reduced, and society displayed notable flexibility and inclusiveness.

Keywords: Nāṭyaśāstra, Varṇa system, Āśrama system, Women in ancient India, Family structure, Religion and society.

Introduction:

Indian society during the period of the Nāṭyaśāstra was organised according to well-established social principles. Bharata's Nāṭyaśāstra, though primarily a treatise on drama and performance, offers valuable insights into the social conditions of the time. References to varṇa, āśrama, family relations, women, religion, and social conduct appear throughout the text. These references allow us to understand how society functioned during that period. This study attempts to present a simple and systematic analysis of the social structure reflected in the Nāṭyaśāstra.

Varṇa System in the Nāṭyaśāstra Period:

The Aryans organised their society in an orderly manner, which later came to be known as the varṇa system. The origin of this system can be traced back to the pre-Vedic or Ṛgvedic period. In the Ṛgvedic age, the varṇa system showed signs of strict division. During the Maurya period, however, some flexibility emerged, and discrimination against lower varṇas gradually decreased.

Ācārya Bharata does not explicitly describe the structure of the varṇa system of his time. Nevertheless, the existence of the system is beyond doubt, because the Nāṭyaśāstra frequently refers to the four varṇas – Brāhmaṇa, Kṣatriya, Vaiśya, and Śūdra. In addition, several mixed and foreign communities such as Barbaras, Kirātas, Āndhras, and Dramiḍas are mentioned. However, the exact social position and rigidity of the varṇa system are not clearly explained. The system appears to have been based on certain foundations.

Varṇa Based on Colour:

The original meaning of the word *varṇa* is 'colour'. From early Vedic times, Indian society recognised two broad groups: the fair-complexioned Aryans (*gaura-varṇa*) and the dark-complexioned non-Aryans (*śyāma-varṇa*). Thus, social division based on colour existed from very early times. The Nāṭyaśāstra also reflects this idea. Bharata states that Brāhmaṇas and Kṣatriyas should always be depicted as fair-complexioned, while Vaiśyas and Śūdras should be dark-complexioned-

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brāhmaṇāḥ kṣatriyāścaiva gaurāḥ kāryāstathaiva hi.
vaiśyāḥ śūdrāstathā caiva śyāmāḥ kāryāstu varṇataḥ.[1]

This shows that colour was an important marker of social distinction. Vaiśyas and Śūdras were generally considered lower varṇas. However, the rigidity was not absolute. In one place, the Nāṭyaśāstra mentions that kings could be either fair or dark in complexion.[2] This indicates that colour-based distinction had limited importance.

During the construction of the theatre (raṅgālaya), separate pillars were built for the four varṇas. The Brāhmaṇa pillar was white, the Kṣatriya pillar red, the Vaiśya pillar yellow, and the Śūdra pillar blue.[3] This again shows symbolic differentiation based on colour.

The same idea is found in the Padma Purāṇa:

Brāhmaṇānaṁ sito varṇaḥ kṣatriyāṇāṁ ca lohitaḥ.
Vaiśyānāṁ pītaś caiva śūdrāṇām asitas tathā.[4]

Thus, although distinctions existed, people of all varṇas could sit in the same theatre and watch performances. This suggests that social interaction was allowed and that the rigidity of the varṇa system had weakened.

Varṇa Based on Dress:

Some scholars interpret varṇa in terms of dress and costume. According to them, different varṇas wore clothes of specific colours. Brāhmaṇas wore white, Kṣatriyas red, Vaiśyas yellow, and Śūdras dark or blue garments. The Nāṭyaśāstra supports this view. During theatrical rituals, white cloth was placed at the Brāhmaṇa pillar, red at the Kṣatriya pillar, yellow at the Vaiśya pillar, and blue at the Śūdra pillar.[5] This indicates that dress also marked social identity.

However, this distinction was not rigid. In another context, the Nāṭyaśāstra states that Brāhmaṇas, Kṣatriyas, and Vaiśyas should all wear śuddha (pure white) garments in drama[6]. This shows that differences among the higher three varṇas were diminishing, though Śūdras continued to occupy a lower position.

Names and Social Address:

The Nāṭyaśāstra mentions that Brāhmaṇa and Kṣatriya names should be formed according to their lineage and profession, using suffixes such as Śarmā and Varmā -

Brahmakṣatrasya nāmāni gotrakarmānurūpataḥ
Kāvye kāryāṇi kavibhiḥ śarmavarmakṛtāni ca.[7]

Manu expresses the same idea:

śarmavaddbrāhmaṇasya syādrājño rakṣāsamanvitam.
vaiśyasya puṣṭisaṁyuktaṁ śūdrasya preṣyasaṁyutam.[8]

Brāhmaṇas were highly respected and could address kings by name.[9] They addressed ministers as amātya or saciva, while lower people had to use respectful terms like ārya.[10] Inferiors could not directly address superiors by name.

Mixed and Foreign Communities:

Besides the four varṇas, the Nāṭyaśāstra mentions many communities, including foreign ones such as Śakas, Yavanas, Pahlavas, Bāhikas, Barbaras, and Kirātas[11]. Their languages were not used in drama. Other communities like Ābhīras, Caṇḍālas, Śabaras, Dramiḍas, and Āndhras are also mentioned[12]. These references suggest inter-varṇa marriages (anuloma and pratiloma), leading to mixed castes.

Āśrama System:

The āśrama system was prevalent during the Nāṭyaśāstra period. Human life was divided into four stages, each lasting approximately twenty-five years:

1. Brahmacarya, 2. Gṛhastha, 2. Vānaprastha and
   4. Sannyāsa

Brahmacarya was the period of education, beginning with the sacred thread ceremony. Gṛhastha was the most important stage, involving marriage, earning livelihood, raising children, and supporting society. Vānaprastha involved withdrawal from worldly life and spiritual practice in forests. Sannyāsa was the final stage, where a person renounced all attachments and became a wandering ascetic. The Nāṭyaśāstra mentions liṅgins, brahmacārins, vānaprasthas[13], sannyāsins[14], and parivrājakas[15]. According to Abhinavagupta, these references confirm the existence of the āśrama system.

Family System:

The family was the most important social unit in ancient India. Through family life, individuals learned moral values, religious duties, social conduct, and cultural traditions. Children were raised under the care and affection of parents and elders.

The Nāṭyaśāstra suggests joint family living. Bharata mentions scenes involving father, son, daughter-in-law, and mother-in-law[16]. Husband and wife shared primary responsibility. The husband (bhartā) protected and supported the wife, while the wife respected and obeyed the husband. Kings and others addressed their wives as priyā.[17] Fathers addressed sons as vatsa or putraka[18]. It is also observed that a wife was addressed as Āryā, by her father's name, or by prefacing her son's name[19].

Position of Women in Society:

In the period of the Nāṭyaśāstra, the position of women in society was comparatively strong and respected. Women enjoyed dignity and social recognition, and they possessed a degree of independence. Women of the household—such as daughters-in-law and mothers-in-law—attended dramatic performances together. Women could also take part independently in drama, dance (nṛtya), and music (gīta).

The use of the term sthānīyā[20] suggests that some women held high or respectable positions in society. Women were addressed with honorific titles, as described in the kākusvaravyañjaka section of the Nāṭyaśāstra. A teacher's wife or a respectable woman was addressed as bhavatī, a

travelling woman as *bhadrā*, and an elderly woman as *ambā*[21].

Queens were respectfully called *bhaṭṭinī*, *svāminī*, or *devī*[22]. The chief queen (*mahiṣī*) was addressed as *devī* by the king and his attendants, while other royal consorts were called *svāminī*[23]. Brāhmaṇa women, religious women (*liṅgasthā*), and women observing vows (*bratinī*) were addressed as *āryā*[24]. A wife was often respectfully called *āryā*, sometimes identified by her father's name—such as '*Māṭharaputrī*'[25]—or by her son's name, for example, 'the mother of Somaśarmā'[26], as noted by Abhinavagupta. The wives of priests and merchants were always addressed as *āryā*[27].

The term *niyamasthā*[28] shows that women regularly observed religious vows. The word *liṅginī*[29] refers to women who followed particular religious sects, indicating that women adopted and practised specific religious paths. The term *pāṣaṇḍinī*[30] suggests that some women became Jain or Buddhist nuns, travelled widely, and acquired philosophical and spiritual knowledge.

Women wore pure (*śuddha*) clothing during religious activities. At the same time, the texts also mention courtesans (*gaṇikā*) and women of questionable character. Thus, although many women were respected, certain categories of women were socially neglected. For example, places associated with ministers, wealthy merchants, Brāhmaṇas, priests, officials, and caravan leaders were not considered suitable for the presence of prostitutes.

Some women were skilled in erotic arts (*kāma-kalā*) and attracted men through various techniques. Women who committed crimes could be punished by beating. A similar rule appears in the *Manusmṛti*, which allows punishment of an offending wife with a rope or bamboo stick[31]. Such punishments seem to have existed during the Nāṭyaśāstra period. However, earlier texts like the *Mahābhārata* present a different view, stating that even if a wife angers her husband, he should not speak harshly to her, and physical punishment is discouraged[32].

The term *kāruśilpinī*[33] refers to women artisans engaged in woodwork, clay work, metal or glass work, and stone carving[34]. This shows that women actively participated in skilled crafts. Women also wore various kinds of ornaments, and some groups of women consumed alcohol (*madya*)[35].

In conclusion, the Nāṭyaśāstra period presents a complex picture of women's lives: women enjoyed respect, education, religious freedom, and professional opportunities, yet social inequality and punishment for certain women also existed.

Marriage:

Marriage was essential for a happy life. Bharata does not describe marriage rituals in detail, but references exist. The term *kautuka*[36] refers to pre-marital rites.

Married women accompanied their husbands to performances and were respected. Polygamy and extra-marital relationships existed, especially among kings. The term *bhoginī* refers to royal concubines[37]. Inter-varṇa marriages were likely practiced.

Crime in Society:

Crime was clearly present in society during this period. The *Nāṭyaśāstra* mentions different types of criminals, such as thieves (*cora*), rogues or cunning people (*dhūrta*)[38], *sandhikara*[39], and *cakracara*[40]. These references show that, because of poor economic conditions, criminal activities had spread widely in society.

The term *sandhikara* most likely refers to people who broke into houses by cutting walls or doors, especially at night[41]. Such people stole money and valuable goods secretly after dark. The word *rātrajīvin*[42] (those who earn their living at night) also clearly points to thieves who operated mainly during nighttime[43].

The Nāṭyaśāstra also uses the word *dhūrta* to describe wicked and dishonest people. This term includes criminals such as troublemakers, gamblers, cheats, swindlers, and professional gamblers. Such people caused harm to society through deception and unlawful activities.

Thus, the presence of thieves, burglars, gamblers, and fraudsters shows that crime was a noticeable social problem during the Nāṭyaśāstra period, largely connected with economic hardship and social instability.

Religion and Ritual Practices:

From the references to Buddhist and Jain monks, we can assume that Buddhism and Jainism were actively practised and preached during this period[44]. People of that time showed special respect and interest in both religions. In the Nāṭyaśāstra, Buddhist and Jain monks are respectfully addressed as bhadanta. The text also mentions the word Śākya, which refers to a Buddhist monk[45]. This shows that Buddhist monks, known as Śākyas[46], travelled and spread Buddhist teachings in society.

The term nirgrantha Is used to describe naked or wandering Jain (and sometimes Buddhist) monks[47]. This indicates that Jainism was preached alongside Buddhism. The Nāṭyaśāstra also refers to followers of the Pāśupata[48] sect, showing that Śaiva religion was also popular. Thus, Buddhism, Jainism, and Śaivism coexisted, and people followed different religious paths.

The word pāṣaṇḍagaṇa suggests that along with believers (āstika), there were also non-believers (nāstika) in society. However, according to Abhinavagupta, pāṣaṇḍa mainly

refers to followers of sects such as the Pāśupatas[49]. The text also mentions parivrājakas—wandering ascetics who travelled from place to place.[50]

Women also took part in religious life and religious preaching. This is shown by the term liṅginī, meaning a woman who bore the symbol of a religious sect.[51] The mention of pāṣaṇḍinī[52] women suggests the presence of Buddhist or Jain nuns. Elderly people found joy and satisfaction by listening to religious stories and purāṇas[53]. Skilled priests performed yajñas, and learned people who knew many sacred texts (nānaśrutidhara) are also mentioned in the Nāṭyaśāstra[54].

Before staging dramatic performances, several rituals and worship ceremonies were performed55. Before constructing a theatre (raṅgālaya), vāstu-pūjā was compulsory. The Nāṭyaśāstra clearly explains the proper method of performing this ritual. In addition, jarjara-pūjā and deva-pūjā were also performed. Jararja-pūjā was considered essential for the success of a dramatic performance.

These rituals were performed using various materials, offerings, and wealth. All this shows that people of that time were highly conscious and careful about religious rituals and worship practices.

Conclusion:

The Nāṭyaśāstra reflects a socially diverse and culturally rich society. Although the varṇa system existed, its rigidity was reduced. The āśrama system, joint family structure, respected position of women, religious plurality, and social inclusiveness are clearly visible. Theatre served as a unifying platform where people of all varṇas could participate. Thus, the Nāṭyaśāstra offers a valuable picture of a flexible and dynamic ancient Indian society.

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