

## BOOK REVIEW

**Kapila Vatsyayan, *Bharata: The Natyasastra*.** New Delhi, India: Sahitya Akademi, 218 pp. ISBN: 978-81-260-1808-9

© 2016 University of Malaya. All rights reserved.

*Malaysian Journal of Performing and Visual Arts*, Volume 2, 2016

Kapila Vatsyayan's *Bharata: The Natyasastra* was first published in 1996 and has been reprinted six times, the most recent being 2015. This book is a compilation of seven scholarly chapters spanning 161 pages that critically re-examine the conventionally upheld interpretations of Bharata's *Natyasastra*, a classical Indian text on creative arts, from both Indian and Western scholarship.

In the first chapter entitled "Bharata: The Question of Authorship", Vatsyayan states that the singular vision, essence and flow of ideas in the *Natyasastra* is prove that it is the product of one author. She goes on to prove that Bharata was an actual person who was deeply embedded in the classical Indian performing arts and subscribed to a school of thought. Although little is known of Bharata, in classical Indian literature, the work(s) of an author—especially the content and context—is more important and thus transcends his own identity, space and time. Such classical works remain relevant because they move to connect between the mind, soul and body as well as between the worldly and divine realms.

The book proceeds to "The *Natyasastra*: Pre-text and Context" to reveal further information of the *Natyasastra* used on its text alone, just as the New Criticism approach. Here, Vatsyayan reveals Bharata's expertise or knowledge of the Vedas and the Brahmanas in terms of text utterance, mythology and associated ritual set to the theatre. The linguistics also exposes an intrinsic understanding of the human body and Vedic mathematics attuned to performance. Based on the creation of the *Natyasastra* as a "fifth Veda" for all people, as preached in the Upanishads, and the authoritative position it held in Indian aesthetics for almost 2000 years, Vatsyayan conjectures the text as being created after the Vedas, Buddha and Jain Tirthankiras but before the Puranas and therefore between 2<sup>nd</sup> century BC and 2<sup>nd</sup> century AD (24).

The third chapter is on "The Primary Text" and confronts the *Natyasastra* manuscripts by Indian and non-Indian scholars that only came to existence in the 12<sup>th</sup> century: the versions in existence, their transmission, authenticity and interpretation and implication. A thorough clarification of its distinction as a *sastra* or literature in the Indian tradition and the contribution of Abinavabharati is also discussed.

The first of two complex chapters in this book is "The *Natyasastra*: The Implicit and Explicit Text" which explains how the text's explicit content should be approached and understood to find its implicit meaning. It is a detailed discussion on the literal and

symbolic nature of the Natyasastra text and its implication on the Indian worldview, beginning with Man, his relationship with himself and nature and ultimately the universe. A succinct explanation of this worldview based on the Rigveda, Tantras and Upanishads is provided and proceeded with a concise re-examination of the 36 chapters of the Natyasastra and of how Bharata drew from these texts for the Natyasastra and in turn, how the Natyasastra is situated within this worldview. The theatrical aspects that are elaborated in detail include: the human anatomy, movement, language and state of mind; the “space”, “shape” and “form”; and the roles of theatre stakeholders.

The following chapter entitled “The Text and Creativity” is a concise overview of the Natyasastra’s applicability in all creative arts, particularly in sculpture, painting and dance, the ways in which Bharata gave structure and form to the arts and how it is evident in the cultural manifestation of Indian, pan-Indian and non-Indian traditions.

The second complex chapter in this book is “Text: The Inflow and Outflow”, which expounds on the various influences and inspirations of the Natyasastra as well as works that were influenced and inspired by it. Although such influences were previously discussed, the extent of existing documented sources is discussed here and the core element that is the Indian worldview is proven here. Much of the discussion highlights the numerous manuscripts and treatises that have branched out of the Natyasastra and produced more specialized thought on the various creative arts. These include the *Brhaddeśi* and *Sangitaratnakari* on music, the *Abhinayadarpana* and *Nrttaratnavali* on dance, the *Kuttambalam* on architecture, the *Silpasastras* on sculpture and iconography and the *Natyadarpana* and *Natakakalaksanaratnakosa* on drama.

The final chapter “The Text and the Interpreters” emphasizes the contributions of later commentators, experts and theorizers of the concepts of *rasa*, *sthayibhava* and *rasanispatti*. Vatsyayan chooses to devote this chapter on those from the region of Kashmir for their unique outlook and scholarship. These include Srisankuka, Bhatta Nayaka, Abhinavagupta and Bhatta Lollata’s discourse on the Natyasastra’s text and practice. The Saiva philosophy is heavily featured to supplement the discussion. The book concludes with situating the Natyasastra within the Indian oral and written history, tradition and scholarship.

When it comes to scholarship, Kapila Vatsyayan stands out as an undisputed authority of the Natyasastra. She conveys her thoughts in a manner that may appear comprehensible but reveals a profound level of expertise. The text itself is reader-friendly as the transition from one chapter to the next is smooth flowing and follows a logical sequence. The Sanskrit words are also translated into English whereas the English jargon has its Sanskrit equivalents. The concluding chapter follows a resourceful and comprehensive bibliography and appendix (a database of all the available texts of the Natyasastra in India, details of institution, library accession number, language and script and commentator) courtesy of the Indira Gandhi National Centre for the Arts.

This book itself comes in a convenient B5 size and with a legible font and printed on quality white paper. The cover page has a picture of the dancing Shiva statue (Nataraja) that befits the content. This book is a solid supplementary book for those who have already gained formal knowledge of the Natyasastra while additional knowledge of the socio-cultural and religious history of classical India will prove more beneficial.

**Salmyyah Raheem**

Cultural Centre, University of Malaya

Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia

Email: salmyyah\_raheem@hotmail.com