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Deciphering the Indian Arts:

The Project of Fundamental Texts: Kalāmūlaśāstra

One of the most important, ground-breaking IGNCA programmes for understanding the Indian Arts is the series of texts called the Kalāmūlaśāstra, "Root texts on the Arts". It is thanks to the great vision of Dr. Kapila Vatsyayan that such a project could be planned and executed, and that it still is an ongoing process. It is no exaggeration that this series shall stand as a lasting contribution to the understanding of the Indian Arts in their different manifestations.

The question is, how do we understand and interpret these art-forms? Shall it be in terms of Western categories and terminologies, as has been the case for long with art history? Indian culture as expressed in its Sanskrit literature is perhaps the richest in the world by way of theoretical reflection on any aspect of art, not to mention other disciplines. It is therefore high time to interpret the various manifestations and cultural expressions in terms of their own tradition. Therefore a thorough presentation of the main sources for understanding the Arts is essential. Each text is presented systematically with a critical edition, an English translation facing it, notes, illustrations, and a comprehensive introduction. As mentioned yesterday in the context of the Kalātattvakośa, a technical Glossary derived from the text illustrates the specific terminology, not only of the art-form, but also of its regional or historical variations. Mostly these technical terms, be they from music or from temple architecture, are not found in Sanskrit Dictionaries, because these texts were not known at the time of their compilation.

The first question discussed at the onset of the project was concerning a selection of relevant texts. There are two major groups of sources for the understanding of the Indian Arts: One is more general, and contained in literature and scriptures such as the Veda, Āgamas, and Purāṇas, which contain important sections on the Arts; the other are technical treatises or Śāstras on specific art-forms, especially those belonging to specific regions. There are other possible ways to classify the texts related to the arts, depending on whether they are descriptive or prescriptive, whether they are intended to understand existing art-forms, or to direct the artist and give him the tools for this creative activity. In the words of the art-historian Thomas Maxwell. Against the view that the Śāstras are dry classifications which are often contradicted by artistic practice, he asserts

"Those texts epitomized and consolidated the culture in which the artist lived and worked, and from which he drew his inspiration; Śilpaśāstra, as the body of texts which effectively legitimized his calling within the culture, has endeavoured to reserve parts of this vision ... All art forms are practical and symbolic expressions of cultural intelligence; they carry a passive burden of assumed or inherited knowledge and an active burden of conscious knowledge which is intentionally communicated. Once one becomes aware of these two interpenetrating levels, the chaotic background of archetypes and the ordered foreground of didacticism, the methods and skills of the artist are defined, just as they are defined by shastric precept: the master *śilpin* must have (without claiming another's province for his own) knowledge of all the arts, from metrics and poetic imagery to music and dance, painting and

sculpture, in increasing detail, his own field being placed last in the list, emphasizing its juniority but also the legitimacy of its traditional descent; and he must be able to mobilise this knowledge in connection with yoga and meditational techniques in order to visualize fully, from brief descriptions, the forms he will create. As an actor in and an agent of his society, he must be open to the cultural sources of that society." (pp.11-12).

Thus the texts present various kinds of sources for the artist, and to interpret art without them means to reduce our understanding of the total context in which art has its meaning.

(KTK Vol. II, p. ix-x.)

One preconceived idea commonly held in the artistic communities is that the Śāstras are dry theoretical treatises, far from practical experience; and from the point of view of the Śāstric scholar, that he is not concerned with practice. The gap between *Śāstra* and *prayoga* is not new; it had been noted by various early authors who complain about the lack of mutual understanding or symbiosis. For instance, the author of the *Saṅgītopanīsat-Sāroddhārah* is "deeply conscious of the hiatus between theory and practice when he comments that dancers are not learned and do not know the texts, and those who know the texts are ignorant of practice." (Kapila Vatsyayan, foreword p.x) A recent example was a series of lectures on aesthetics based on the Śāstras, delivered by great Pandits and scholars in Varanasi. My lecture on *Śilpāśāstra* was the only one that was illustrated! I got the feeling that these Pandits did not connect their theories to any visual or auditory expression -- not to talk of any creative art activity. On the other hand, performing artists often show a disdain for theoretical questions concerning their art.

It is this division of Śāstra and Prayoga which the Kalāmūlaśāstra programme has gone a long way towards overcoming. Ideally, some of the authors in this series are both scholars and performing artists, especially in the field of music.

Another misconception is that the Śāstras are canonical prescriptions, leaving no space for creative freedom. In the words of Kapila Vatsyayan: " for the authors of the śāstras, the text - especially the Śāstra, was not prescriptive, fixed, nor was it theory, understood in its usual connotation. Instead it was indeed flexible and fluid, immutable in regard to certain guiding principles but with an inbuilt capacity for change, flexibility and varied interpretation. Thus the text and the practice interpenetrated and walked in and out of each other." (Foreword to Śilparatnakośa, p. viii.) An important text on the principles of image-making says at the end of describing the methods of sculpture: "In all the worlds there is freedom (for the artist)" (*sarvesu lokesu kāmācāro bhavati*, Vāstusūtra Upaniṣad I.10, p. 51). Is it not an extraordinary statement, contradicting the view that the Śāstras lock the artist with strict canons?

Let us come to the question of the selection of the texts for this series. Here again, it is the deep understanding of Dr. Kapila Vatsyayan, in consultation with a number of scholars, which has resulted in a significant selection, which can be grouped into five categories.

- (1) Since many art-forms have their roots in ritual, the first group consists in texts of the Vedic and Āgamic traditions which contain the foundation of the Indian Arts. Ritual is a precursor of drama, and not by chance does the Nāṭyaśāstra call the dramatic performance a sacrifice (*yajña*). Besides, the roots for Indian music

lie in the Sāmavedic chant, and other forms of recitation of the hymns. Architecture has its first manifestation in the construction of Vedic altars and sacrificial halls, as described in the Sūtras, which is also the origin of geometry in India. The texts on recitation contain the foundation of phonetics, linguistics and prosody. Some Vedic texts (such as the Lātyāyana Śrautasūtra) also describe the oldest musical instruments like different types of *vīṇās* and *duṇḍubhi* drums.

Apart from the Vedic texts, Brāhmaṇas and Śrauta *sūtras*, the Śaiva Āgamas and Vaiṣṇava Saṃhitās are rich sources for art, especially temple architecture, sculpture and iconography. If most of the concepts, as discussed yesterday, derive from Vedic literature, most art forms, connected with temple, image, and the connected arts, derive from Tantra or Agama. The description of the Āgamic ritual itself (in the section on *Kriyā*) contains aesthetic aspects, which are specially on display on the occasions of temple festivals. This is a vast area and one in which I am at home. But here I am just giving a survey without going into details.

- (2) The second group of texts are the Purāṇas, which contain important sections on the Arts. Most famous is the Citrasūtra of the Viṣṇudharmottara Purāṇa, especially since it establishes the interrelationship between the various arts.

In general, the Purāṇas are different from the Vedic and Āgamic texts, in so far "they provide another method of relating the abstract and the concrete, the universal and the specific, the philosophic and the artistic. The chapters on the arts in the Purāṇas have to be comprehended against the larger concerns. There is the endeavour

to contain multi-dimensions of concepts and meanings through narrative myth and its transformation into a vocabulary of formal elements in the arts, singly and together". (IGNCA, A Retrospect, p.39).

Before coming to the next group of texts, it must be mentioned here that the central text connecting and underlying all the arts is still missing and under preparation: the Nāṭyaśāstra of Bharata Muni. It lies between the Vedic-Āgamic-Paurāṇic texts and the specialized Śāstras in the different art-forms. The critical edition and translation of different sections has been going on for some decades, and it is hoped that this vital all-encompassing text will soon see the light of day.

3. The next section are Śāstras on music and dance; these comprise the largest number of texts. In this field, where the artistic traditions are very much alive, the IGNCA has contributed substantially to the preservation and authentic tradition of these art-forms. Without enumerating the whole series, one has to point out some highlights: the *Dattilam*, "a remarkable treatise from the earliest known period of organized systematic writing on music in India" (ibid. p. 40). The *Bṛhaddeśī* of Mataṅga Muni: "A landmark in Saṅgītaśāstra for more than one reason. It is the solitary text that forges a link between *Nāṭyaśāstra* and *Dattilam* on one hand and *Abhinavabhāratī* on the other, the gap extending over more than 500 years. Its direct influence on later texts like *Saṅgītaratnākara* and its commentaries is obvious in various ways, be it *nāda* from the tāntric stream or the etymology of various terms or the description of *rāgas*".

IGNCA – A Retrospect, p.42

The editor and translator, the eminent musicologist Dr. Prem Lata Sharma, has contributed in many ways to the research programmes of Kalākośa. In another context (outside the series) she published and co-edited the *Saṅgitaratnākara* of Śārṅgadeva. In her introduction to that important text she has proposed breaking down the chronology of the *Saṅgītaśāstra* into four periods, which could also be applied to other Śāstras of the arts:

Period I: Primary and Formative — 1500 B.C. to 500 A.D.

Period II: Expository and Expansive — 600 A.D. to 1200 A.D.

Period III: Reconciliatory and Revaluative — 1300 A.D. to 1750 A.D.

Period IV: Critical and Interpretative — 1750 A.D. onwards.

*Saṅgītaratnakāra* of Śārṅgadeva, P. xxxii.

After the earlier texts on music and dance, attention may be drawn to the 17<sup>th</sup> century *Saṅgītanārāyaṇa* of Puruṣottama Miśra. In the Foreword to this text Dr. Kapila Vatsyayan writes:

It is evident that neither the textual tradition nor the oral systems were 'static' or stagnant at any given moment. Although at the level of the theory there was and has been an extra-ordinary continuity, i.e. what has been termed as the *rasa* or *rasa-dhvani* theory, there has been a phenomenon of deviation, change and innovation ...

Coming to the important distinction between *mārgi* and *deśī*, mostly translated as 'classical' and 'regional' or 'folk':

From the thirteenth century onwards there is a near pan-Indian phenomenon of the evolution of rigorous regional schools, call them *deśī* forms or not, and yet adhering to certain fundamental

principles of 'form' which had an unmistakable continuity with the earlier ancient traditions at the level of broad principles of organizing sound or movement.

The IGNCA has endeavoured to make explicit this vitality in the textual tradition through the publications of texts emerging from different regions...

The phenomenon of a vertical flow of fundamental concepts and the ever-widening horizontal movement to different regions of India is a characteristic feature. The ability to hold on to a 'centre' of concepts, fundamental principles and to encompass a staggering multiplicity of expressions in forms are concurrent movements.

Saṅgītanārāyaṇa, Foreword

4. The fourth group are texts on Architecture and Sculpture: Śilpa and Vāstuśāstras. These texts had been neglected by the indologists because their Sanskrit does not conform to classical grammar, on the one hand, and on the other they require a technical knowledge of architecture generally not available to the Sanskrit scholar. But they are all the more important as instruments for "deciphering" the temples, or, as Michael Meister once put it, "reading monuments and seeing texts".

Having worked on three Śilpa texts from Orissa I had to learn to 'translate' the text into the temple. This process of correlating has been going on for about 20 years, going back and forth from text to temple and vice-versa. But it was a very rewarding experience with some surprising insights. It is here where I can speak from my experience.

The beauty of these texts is that along with technical descriptions of section of the temple etc. they give hints to the symbolism implied. I quote from my Introduction:

Another important function of such a text, which it can fulfill even today, is to reveal the symbolic significance of the temple and all its parts, a significance which is easily forgotten. After studying its content, one will look at the temples with new eyes, and discover hidden aspects which a superficial view, and even a purely archaeological description or art-historical analysis, cannot unravel...

Just as poetry uses language in a free way, yet it has to follow the rules of grammar, so the Śilpaśāstra contains a grammar of the form-language of a given art, its content and style. A grammar always gives rules for possible combinations of words forming sentences, and similarly our text describes form-elements which can be variously combined and applied.

Śilparatnakośa, Introduction, p.1-2

Here I would like to give an example of how these texts can reveal unexpected information and insights. I take the example from the Silparatnakosa on which I have worked extensively.

Silpasastras describe temple types and not individual temples. But by hints one can discover the identity of a type with a particular temple. The text describes two fundamental types, one which envisages the spire in the form of Purusa, or the divine body, giving all the correspondences between the architectural parts and the body parts. This is meant for temples dedicated to male deities. But then it adds that there is another type which is called Manjusri and is meant for Sakti temples. Along with

a detailed description it calls this form “a *yantra* temple”, and it says that it is built in the form of the *Sricakra*, relating it to both, the ground plan and the elevation. At another place it says clearly that “such a temple is built for Tripura or Bhuvaneshvari” (v. 376). This description, as well as the name Manjusri led me to discover the Rajarani Temple in Bhubaneswar as the perfect example of this temple type, and one of the rare examples of a Sriyantra as *meruprastara* in full three-dimensional architectural form. Iconographic details confirmed the entire symbolism of the Sricakra. This was an exciting discovery, based on the text, because the Rajarani Temple had not been identified earlier, because no image or *linga* had been preserved in its sanctum. The popular name could also be identified with the name of the Deity, *Rajarajeshvari*. This is an abbreviated description of a long process leading from the text to the temple.

5. The fifth group concerns texts on Poetics and Aesthetics. These texts were not as neglected as the Śāstras on music, dance, temple architecture and sculpture, because there is a long scholarship on Kāvyaśāstra. But without them no vision of the Indian arts will be complete. They provide the paradigms and basic definitions of literary criticism and aesthetic theory. The Śṛṅgāraprakāśa of Bhoja and the Sarasvatikaṇṭhābharaṇa are classical texts dealing with *alaṅkara* (ornamentation), *rasa* (aesthetic sentiment), *doṣa-guṇa* (defects and qualities of poetry), etc.

Coming back to some of the fundamental questions that this Series raises, and since in any case it would be impossible to go into details (with the exception of some examples), we may note some important aspects, generally concerning most of these texts.

1) The question of terminology – linking this lecture to yesterday’s on Kalatattvakosa. One should not underestimate the importance of the terminology used in presenting and describing an art-form. What I called “linguistic neo-colonialism” yesterday applies here. Again, there are two levels of original terminologies which place the respective art in its own context and tradition. The first are the fundamentals, which are largely common and pervasive (the content of the Kalatattvakosa), which reflect the cultural background, the underlying cosmology and anthropology, as well as the psychology of the aesthetic experience (an important contribution of the Natyasastra and its great commentary by Abhinavagupta).

The other are the specific terminologies of the different art-forms, as mentioned earlier, one of the results of the publication of these texts. Here again, there is a distinction between texts relating to regional variations (*desi*, in a sense), and pervasive texts which can be applied from East to West, and North to South. Many of the regional art-forms naturally also use vernacular words in their terminology, and it would be artificial to want to sanskritize them. The imposition of, e.g. Sanskrit terminology derived from Western Indian texts (such as Samaranganasutradhara, Aparajitaprccha) on the whole of temple architecture is another way of colonizing! Regional variations have to be respected in both, their form and their terminology.

Of course, it may be argued that ultimately the specific terms have to be translated for the sake of the non-Sanskrit knowing reader. But a translation, though necessary, cannot replace the original term with its layers of meaning. Take a well-known example like *kalasa* (or *kumbha*, its synonym), translated in the Glossary as “water-jar”, and explained as

the “crowning element of the temple in the shape of a stone vase”. This has necessarily to be further explained: “symbolizing the vase of fullness (*punakumbha*) which contains nectar (*amrta*).” (Glossary to *Silparatnakosa*, p. 197)

For people living in the Indian tradition, the words *kalasa* and *kumbha* are full with these associations, symbolisms, and the ritual use of these forms. For those familiar with yoga traditions it will further lead to an extended symbolism: that the temple spire or *sikhara* represents the divine body, and the *kalasa* on top is related to the *brahmarandhra*, as mentioned in the *Silparatnakosa* (it is in fact structurally inserted in a hole). This implies that the *amrta* (ambrosia) is trickling down through the body of the spire, as it does in the body of the yogi who has reached that stage, and symbolically descending on the Sivalinga (or image) in the sanctum (again, the term *garbha* is used externally for the body of the spire, and internally for the *garbha-grha* or the inner sanctum, the womb-chamber). This entire symbolism with its aesthetic, ritual and spiritual implications would not be contained in the word “water-jar”!

Thus we can see that terminology goes far beyond certain words that can be used interchangeably, or translated, without losing a whole world of meaning! Examples could be multiplied.

2) Talking of “a world of meaning”, we have already trespassed into another realm. The danger of appreciating the art-forms, or even practicing them, without the knowledge and the world of meaning contained in these rich texts would be to reduce them to their superficial aesthetic appearance – and that is already happening in the present-day scenario. On the contrary, instead of making them objects of pleasure (such as a dance or music performance), they are meant to change our

way of perception. Rainer Maria Rilke, in his poem on the archaic torso of Apollo, after describing the torso as it is filled with life, ends with the line: “you have to change your life.”

“Objectifying” art is the great danger, because then one can exploit it, commercialise it, reduce it to consumerist entertainment. If we are no longer able to understand the universe of meaning. The spiritual message, underlying and conveyed through these art-forms, we have to go back to the texts, which have been so comprehensively presented in the Kalamulasastra Series, and then try to see and hear the arts afresh, and allow them to change our lives.

3) The third aspect has already been mentioned earlier, but needs to be emphasized again at the end. It is the interconnectedness of, on the one hand, the different arts, on the other between the dimensions of the encompassing vision with the specialized, highly technical descriptions and prescriptions, and with aesthetic theory. Certainly, the Natyasastra encompassed all these aspects, but even in the specialized texts they are present in one form or another.

To give just a few examples. The two art-forms which are obviously connected are dance and sculpture, representing the dynamic and the static aspects. Poetry and painting are also mutually connected. Just as drama is containing all art-forms in theory and practice, the temple is another universe, where architecture, sculpture, painting, music and dance find a place, in the context of ritual and enactment of the divine, hence containing the dramatic elements.

Specialized studies are necessary, but should never lose sight of the totality in which the art-forms have to be understood. For instance, looking at temple-architecture merely from a technical architectural point

of view misses out the complex interrelationships with the other arts involved. This totality of meaning can be called the sacred, but in India we find a certain allergy of talking of the sacred in the secular context. However, the two are not mutually exclusive, but it is precisely in the arts where they complement each other. We should not shy from this dimension of the sacred which can be rediscovered in its various manifestations in the Indian arts.

The texts published in the Kalamulasastra Series are a vivid testimony of the sacredness of the secular.