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## Deciphering the Indian Arts:

### The Project of Fundamental Texts: Kalāmūlāsāstra

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One of the most important, ground-breaking IGNCAs programmes for understanding the Indian Arts is the series of texts called the Kalāmūlāsāstra, "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 also presented systematically with a critical edition of the text, 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 Śilpaśāstra 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 nor 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 Vatsyayn, 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 calls 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, Brāhṃaṇas and Śrauta sūtras, the Śaiva Āgamas and Vaiṣṇava Saṃhitās are rich sources for art, especially temple architecture, sculpture and iconography. The description of the Āgamic ritual itself (in the section on *Kriyā*) contain aesthetic aspects, which are specially on display on the occasions of temple festivals.

- (2) The second group of texts are the Purāṇas, which contain important sections on the Arts. Most famous is the Citrasūtra of the Viṣṇudharmottar 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 Bhārata 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 compose 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 coring 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 *Saṅgītaratnākara* 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 — 2000 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 Śāraṅgadeva, P. xxxii.

After the earlier texts on music and dance, attention may be drawn to the 17<sup>th</sup> century *Saṅgītanārāyaṇa* of Puruṣottama Mīśra. 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 *mārgar* 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 fulfil 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

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*, *rasa*, *doṣa*, *guṇa* etc.