

Aharya Abhinaya – A Study

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The Art of Theatre is referred to as “Nātya” and Bharata Muni defines it as the ‘glorified’ imitation of the world around us (lokānukértnam) wherein the various situations with different emotions, conveying pleasure, and pain, are depicted through the four Abhinayas or modes of communication namely: āngika (physical), vācika (verbal), āhārya (ornamental) sātāvika (intellectual and emotional). The purpose of this Nātya is to create in the audience aesthetic relish and pleasure known as Rasa.

Among all the modes of representation Bharata gives Āhārya Ābhinaya, the most powerful status of communication to establish the intended rasa. He says that when an artiste is dressed up as a particular character, the concept and context is already communicated, even before a word is spoken or an action performed. Āhārya Abhinaya is referred to as the wall or canvas on which other abhinayas are easily painted. Āhārya Abhinaya represents collectively the external elements of communication such as the costume, ornaments, make-up, and stage props, which is referred to as “Nepathya” in Chapter XXI of the Nātya Sāstra. Bharata has devoted only one chapter to Āhārya Abhinaya per se, however, the significance he attaches to it is evident from the constant mention of it in almost every chapter. There are certain basic principles in the Nātya Čāstra, which have remained valid for all times to come. There is a sense of universality and perennial purposefulness in his approach to Āhārya, which does not restrict itself to a given period of time.

Surprisingly, many scholars who have done extensive work on translation and interpretation on other topics, have not paid adequate attention to Āhārya Abhinaya, including Abhinavagupta. Āhārya Abhinaya according to Bharata makes the performance of other abhinayas fall in place effortlessly.

A deeper study of the chapter on Āhārya Abhinaya (Ch. XXI) reveals an amazing wealth of information available about Bhāratavarā. The aim in dealing with an exclusive study of the Āhārya Abhinaya is threefold.

1. To bring out the importance given by Bhārata to Āhārya Abhinaya in Nātya and its relevance for all times with cross-reference from other chapters.
2. To showcase the vast treasure of social history available in the chapter in the context of the different communities and class, religious orders and tribes, identifiable through their āhārya.
3. To establish the emotional impact of Āhārya. The rasa-realisation of a production is primarily kindled by the āhārya in the form of dress, colour of make-up, props and accessories, which become the vibhāva or determinant to establish the sthāyī bhāva to create Rasa. There is an instant communication of the character through the āhārya and a rapport beyond language and action is established with the spectator.

The different perspectives of Aharya Abhinaya are dealt along with the four -fold classification of Pusta (model work of stage props and sets), Alankāra (decoration with ornaments and dress), Anga-racana (cosmetic painting of the body) and Sajjiva (life-like representation of birds, animals, and inanimate objects, giving the touch of realistic presentation). These again are with reference to Pravrtti (regional preferences), Dharmi

(style of presentation) Rasa (asthetic relish), deça (region), jāti (class or category) and avasthä (mental condition) of the character. Ähärya Abhinaya through ages has been studied in the thesis with literary, sculptural and pictorial Evidence.

Continuity of the Nätya Sastraic traditions in the Ähärya Abhinaya of today's Theatre is clearly brought by 2 case studies, one of Shri Manohar of Tamil Nadu, known as a wizard in stagecraft and two Jayashree's own production in Marathi "Bhakta Sakha Vitthala."

Factors Enhancing Ähärya's appeal viz., lighting, Backdrop curtains, Synthetic Materials for model work and Symbolic Devices in Ähärya have been elucidated with reference to Dr Padma Subrahmanyam's "Meenäkshi Kalyänam" produced for the Doordarshan Kendra, New Delhi, for the Doordarshan Archives. This showcases how the various concepts of ähärya have been adapted beautifully to the requirement of the modern technique of multiple camera photography and the space area of a studio to be viewed on a two dimensional screen. The effect of lighting and backdrop screens which are modern additions to ähärya are judiciously juxtaposed with the traditional ähärya to bring out the terrestrial and celestial locales and transport us to the period of the Pandya Raja in Madurai.

The vast variety of ähärya, delineated in an exclusive chapter on Ähärya Abhinaya [Chapter XXI] of Nätya Nāstra shows what an advanced form of theatrical art existed in Bhāratavarña from very early times. This single chapter itself gives us an insight into the anthropological elements of that period. People of various class, caste, creed and professions made up an extremely civilized society rich in arts, religions, politics, philosophy and the very way of life itself. In this thesis an attempt has been made to show how our ancient wisdom has continued to guide the artistes through the centuries.

Bharata rightly proclaims:

Vayonurüpaù prathamastu veño veñänurüpena gatipracäraù /
Gatipräcänugatam ca pathyam pathyänurüpo abhinayasca karyaù //

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"Firstly make-up and costume should be done according to the age context and nature of the character, followed by proper movements and gestures, correct voice and speech and finally by the responsive emotional reactions.
