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Social Attitude towards Performing Artists in Ancient India

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Abstract:

Performing art had been an integral part of ancient Indian society since time immemorial. The Dharmashastras, the codified laws governing the ancient Indian society, given by the famous lawmakers of ancient India like Manu, Yajnavalkya, Apastamba, Gautama, Narada, Brhaspati and others, upheld the low morals of the performing artists in general and actors in particular. They were barred from being witnesses in the law court or being invited to a shraddha ceremony. Householders were forbidden to accept food from them. The rule of adultery was also against them. The heterodox sects which had come up as a protest against Brahminical orthodoxy was also against performing art. The art of using makeup, dressing up and engaging in leisurely pursuits like singing, dancing and playing musical instruments were considered immoral by the puritan sect. Buddha himself a puritan was totally against all kinds of exuberance and excitement. The performing artists especially the actresses were considered to be debased and immoral. The rise of the universal monarchy of Magadh under the centralized bureaucracy of the Mauryas had ushered in the rule of the paternal despot. Ashoka under the guidance of his philosophy of Dhammavijaya had sought to control the lives of his subjects, which would be morally suitable. The secular festivals or Samajas were seen as economic waste and immoral by the pious and puritan despot. He even went to the extent of banning these festivities. Ashoka had however encouraged state sponsored shows to propagate his ideas of Dhammavijaya and centralisation. The secular literature of Kautilya and Vatsyayana had presented a mixed picture of the acting professionals in ancient India. The performers were accepted as taxpayers and were recruited by the agents of the king as spies in the elaborate espionage system of the Mauryan state. The Arthashastra also advocated that the theatre personnel could provide distractions to bring out the enemy during the siege of a fort. However Kautilya clubbed all kinds of performing artists with the prostitute and even set them to be governed by a department headed by the ganikadhakshya. The Kamasutra of Vatsyayana also projected this picture of ambivalence. The Mahabharata equated the performing artists with beggars, eunuch and madmen. Their importance was grudgingly accepted, but the performing artists were treated with contempt and disdain by the ancient Indian society.

Keywords: *Lawmakers, caste society, performers, puritan, moral, ambivalence*

Since time immemorial art and culture has been an inseparable aspect of human life. Art in all its forms has preserved the culture and social system of a particular period or era. The visual arts like “nāṭya” have had a direct contact with the minds of the viewers and the impact of such media on the human mind has been like a photo imprint. So whatever the artist has visually created on the stage has influenced the mind and worked slowly and diligently to change the attitudes and habits of the society. Thus the artist have had to be always cautious and restrained about their creative approach out of necessity. ⁽¹⁾The study of performers and actors has not always been a central and systematic feature of theatre studies. At various times, buildings, social organizations, dramatic texts and performance analysis have seemed to occupy more attention than what one would have normally considered the defining element of the theatre i.e. the performer. ⁽²⁾

The social position of the actors appears to have been very low in ancient India. Many ancient writers speak of the actors in the same breath as prostitutes, bandits, thieves and eunuchs. With the gradual stratification of the Brahmanical society, a lot of stigma was attached to the persons following unconventional profession and menial jobs. Whenever something or someone, did not confer or adhere to the strict rules of caste morality, he was socially ostracized and considered an outcaste. Acting being somewhat unconventional, elicited the red eyes of the moral police of the ancient period. The brahmanical law books abound in a number of references as to how these professionals were to be segregated and treated by the caste society. Even the heterodox religious like Jainism and Buddhism. Especially Buddhism did not grant much respect to the performing artists and more or less followed the general view of society, in spite of being a protestant religion, which had come into being as a protest against Brahmanical hypocrisy and atrocity.

The Natyashastra of Bharata the most celebrated work on drama and dramaturgy in ancient India recorded that drama had been created by Lord Brahma himself as the pancamaveda and Lord Shiva had himself undertaken the task of introducing dance and music into it. It had then been entrusted to Bharata, who then taught his 100 sons the nuances of this great art. ⁽³⁾ The sons of Bharata had acquired the art quite well and their performances had been appreciated by the gods and the sages. The drama had even been compared to a Vedic sacrifice and it was said that the gods were more pleased by witnessing a drama than by worship of flowers and sandalwood. Thus it was holy and auspicious. ⁽⁴⁾ Bharata then mentioned that once his sons intoxicated with success mimicked and caricatured the sages in a particular type of drama and made them an object of ridicule. In anger the sages cursed the 100 sons of Bharata that their descendents would be born Shudras, the lowest rank of the caste system. ⁽⁵⁾ Fearing that this might mean the end of dramatic art, Indra and the other gods approached Bharata for a solution. The sages also reassured the gods that dramatic art would continue, even if the actors were cursed. Meanwhile, Bharata's sons tried to commit suicide in misery and desperation. ⁽⁶⁾ Bharata's sons repented and asked for forgiveness of the sages, who relented and declared that the sons of Bharata would have to teach other worthy pupils the art of dramatic production and also perform prayscitta. Then a famous king Nahusa requested Bharata that he desired Bharata and his sons would come down on earth and promulgate the Natyashastra on earth. He wanted the sons of Bharata to be his guests and perform the plays at his court. ⁽⁷⁾ This was how drama was born from divine intervention and brought down to earth among the mortals. Thus the actors started depending entirely on the patronage of the kings and wealthy individuals. The actors were always on the move seeking engagements in one town or the other. There were very few permanent theatrical companies in the ostentatious courts of the royals. There was also always intense rivalry between different theatre troupes to attain prominence in competitions organize in times of religious and princely festivals, great pilgrimage, private or public celebrations of some importance and also most importantly at spring festivals. ⁽⁸⁾

Dancing, singing and dramatic performances had always been associated with the religious observances of the ancients even long before the Mesolithic period down to the Vedic age. Even from as early the 4th century A.D. onwards rooms or halls had been usually set aside for dancing, singing, dramatic performances, epic recitations within the premises of the temple complexes. ⁽⁹⁾ Even Panini, the celebrated grammarian had held the dramatic personnel in high esteem. He added that the Natasutras of Shilalin and Krshvalin were held in no less respect than the other legal texts of the time. ⁽¹⁰⁾ Gradually orthodox opinion stiffened against actors, dancers and singers in the time of the Dharmashastras and the early Smritis.

Apasthamba forbade a student from looking at dancing or going to assemblies nor to crowds assembled at festivals. He also declared that a student had to discontinue studying the Vedas if he heard the sounds of musical instruments and even equated it with the barking of dogs, bray of asses, cry of wolves or jackals and sounds of weeping. ⁽¹¹⁾ Another lawmaker Gautama advocated that a student of the Vedic tenants had to avoid dancing, singing, playing musical instrument together with honey, meat, perfumes, garlands, ointments, collyrium and other such worldly objects. ⁽¹²⁾ Baudhayana also advised a student to avoid dancing, singing, playing musical instruments, use of perfumes, garlands and all kinds of makeup. ⁽¹³⁾ He further added that the study of the Vedas had to be interrupted while a strong wind blows, a foul smell is perceptible, when dancing is going on and while sounds of singing, musical instruments and weeping is audible. ⁽¹⁴⁾ Manu, the most famous of the ancient law givers of India also advocated the same views. He provided that a student was to avoid dancing, singing and instrumental music. ⁽¹⁵⁾ From the above regulations it is quite obvious that the ancient law givers considered performing art to be diversion to be avoided by the students for their betterment and even associated them with inauspicious objects.

Regarding the rules of the house holder, the law givers of ancient India was equally stringent. Gautama forbade those who engaged in playing musical instruments, dancing, singing, use of bow, trader or handicraftsman, a leper, gambler, thieves from being invited to the funeral ceremony of the forefathers, or a dinner organized in the honour of the gods. ⁽¹⁶⁾ Manu also advocated that an actor, singer, one who has broken the vow of studentship, one whose only or first wife is a shudra female, the son of a remarried women, a one-eyed man, and he in whose house the paramour of his wife resides were to be excluded from a shraddha ceremony. ⁽¹⁷⁾ Medatithi the famous commentator of Manu further added that Manu had mentioned Kushilava which included actors, singers, bards, jugglers, dancers, and the likes from being excluded from the shraddha ceremony. ⁽¹⁸⁾ Manu also forbade a householder from accepting food from an actor, a stage player, and musicians and termed them as liars. ⁽¹⁹⁾ Yajnavalkya also forbade a householder from taking food from an actor along with a thief, eunuch, miser, public woman, a physician, drunkard, enemy and vratya. ⁽¹⁹⁾

The ancient law givers of India held the performing artists in very low esteem. Brhaspati termed some artists as thieves and likened them with cheats, corrupt judges, gamblers and others. ⁽²⁰⁾ Manu mentioned that actors, travelling bards, deceiving men, ogres were the highest level of existence to which darkness leads. Pugilists (jhalla), wrestlers, dancers, arms-dealers, addicted gamblers and drunkards were the lowest level of existence to which energy leads. Manu also added that from an outlaw who was a ruler the castes of dancer, pugilists, wrestler and actor was born. ⁽²¹⁾ Medatithi the commentator of Manu also added that sailusha or an actor meant one who prostituted his wife for money or favour. ⁽²²⁾ Manu further added that dancers, singers, gamblers, cruel men, seller of spirituous liquor were to be banished from town. He remarked that those who practiced the art of dancing and singing caused the loss of their caste. ⁽²³⁾

Thus it can be seen that the integrity of the performing artists was always questioned by the ancient law givers. They were usually if not always associated with thieves, bandits, liars, public woman, outcasts and even eunuchs. The performing artists could not even be a witness in a law court. Narada mentioned that an actor and a bard could not be a witness in a lawsuit and considered them as incompetent as witnesses. However, when adultery, or a robbery or a heinous crime had been committed, they could give evidence. ⁽²⁴⁾ Manu also declared that an actor, dancer, singer, musician could not be a witness in a lawsuit. ⁽²⁵⁾ Yajnavalkya also advised that actors like drunkards, madmen, gamblers, heretics, outcasts, deformed persons were not to be produced as witness in law suits. ⁽²⁶⁾

As regards the rules of adultery, Manu instructed that wives of actors and singers could be considered as immoral women as the men folk of these women used to send their own wives to others. However if one secretly maintained liaisons with them, he was compelled to pay a small fine. Bards like mendicants were allowed to converse with married women. ⁽²⁷⁾ Brhaspati also forbade a woman from visiting public spectacles or festivals in the absence of her husband. ⁽²⁸⁾ Yajnavalkya also advocated the same view, that a woman whose husband was absent could not witness social festivals. ⁽²⁹⁾

Thus the low morals of the acting professionals were upheld by the ancient law makers of India. The female members were considered over generous in bestowing their favours to their admirers. Many of the actresses came from the courtesan class as the ganikas were the custodians of performing arts in ancient India. This fact which has been ascertained by the Kamasutra of Vatsyayana. Even the famous grammarian Patanjali in the 1st century A.D. had referred to the mercenary and immoral attitude of the acting professionals. ⁽³⁰⁾

Buddha also did not approve of the dramatic performances and other such amusements as he thought that the sensuous arts would create confusion in the minds of his disciples. The Cullavagga of the Vinay Pitaka mentioned that the bhikkus were forbidden to witness dancing, singing and music like the lay people who still enjoyed the pleasures of the world. They were also forbidden to chant the dhamma in singing fashion. ⁽³¹⁾ The Kullavagga mentioned that certain bhikkus who used to dance, sing, play music, mimicked other people's art, amused themselves at games, had chariot races, archery matches, rode elephants and horses, practiced swordsmanship, exhibited signs of anger, wrestled and boxed with their fists were considered unsuitable and evil by the Buddha. Those monks who spread their robes out on stage and invited dancing girls to dance with them were also considered evil. Buddha had rebuked them and ordered his trusted disciples Shariputta and Moggalana to carry out the act of Banishment (from the samgha) against these bhikkus. ⁽³²⁾ The Avadanashataka refers to an interesting incident regarding Buddha's attitude towards the actors in general and the actresses in particular. Kuvalayā a beautiful and charming daughter of a manager of a drama company tried to entice and seduce the monks and even the Buddha with her youth and beauty. While enacting a part on the stage she undressed herself completely and thus transcended all the normative levels of decency. The Buddha in anger cursed her and turned her into a hideous old woman. She later repented and entered the life of the samgha, after renouncing all worldly pleasures. ⁽³³⁾ The famous courtesan Vimala, who had joined the bhikkuni sangha made the confession that she used to entice the youths by a frank exhibition of her bare body and this corroborates well with the Kuvalaya anecdote. ⁽³⁴⁾

The low morals of the acting professionals and the threat they presented to the society was also expressed in the epics. The Mahabharata though agreed that the king should extend his patronage to the entertainers like nata meaning an actor, nartaka or dancer, malla or wrestler and mayavin or magician as they delighted everybody with their art and added to the charm of the capital. However in times of war, actors or Kushilavas had to leave the country and they were clubbed together with beggars, eunuchs and mentally unsound people. ⁽³⁵⁾ Nata was said to be of a low caste and was included among the 7 antyajias. The Mahabharata also allowed a shudra to resort to the stage and take the parts of women and to exhibit dumb shows. ⁽³⁶⁾

Secular literature like the Arthashastra of Kautilya and the Kamasutra of Vatsyayana, though was far less strict than the canonical law givers. But they also could not shake off the conventional notion of the low morality of the performing artists in general and actors and actresses in particular. The Kamasutra of Vatsyayana enumerated the 64 art or kalas to be acquired by the ganikas in order to make themselves attractive to their clients. Vocal and instrumental music, dancing, knowledge of dramas and stories, the art of making costumes, ointments, floral art, perfumes and makeup was included in them. ⁽³⁷⁾ The dancing girl or nati was mentioned as a courtesan by Vatsyayana. The wife of a shilpakara or artisan was also referred to as a type of public women. ⁽³⁸⁾ Vatsyayana also added that a courtesan endowed with character, beauty and virtues attained an honored place in society and acquired the rank of a ganika. ⁽³⁹⁾

The Arthashastra mentioned about the low morals of the miscellaneous class of people referred to as performing artists. From the differential punishment prescribed for a wife attending a dramatic performance without the consent of her husband this view is evident. ⁽⁴⁰⁾ The Arthashastra also prescribed that in the newer settlements, people had to be involved in working the fields to increase productivity in the terms of labour, money, commodities and other products. In these areas no grounds or buildings for recreation was to be provided for actors, dancers, singers, musicians, storytellers as they would be a diversion and would obstruct the work of the people. ⁽⁴¹⁾ Entertainers were also prohibited from moving from one village to another during the monsoons so as not to hamper the agricultural activities of the people. ⁽⁴²⁾ The Arthashastra had also listed a number of performing artists like nata (actor), nartaka (dancer), vadyaka (musician), gayaka (singer), puranika (recite of puranic literature), kathaka (storytellers), mimics, jugglers, acrobats, conjurers, wandering minstrel and people who deal in women to be supervised by a department headed by the Ganikadhyaksha. ⁽⁴³⁾ Kautilya thus clubbed the performers with the prostitutes and made the same rules suffice for them also.

The Arthashastra however admitted the usefulness of this group of performers. They were recognised as tax payers.⁽⁴⁴⁾ A king could also employ the theatre personal as spies who would try to reach the enemy king. The artistes who were well versed in sign languages and signals also could be employed by the king, who using the guise of the profession of their relatives was useful in detecting and murdering foreign spies.⁽⁴⁵⁾ The agents and spies of the king could also disguise themselves as entertainers (actors, singers, storytellers, conjurers, acrobats, brothel keepers, bards and buffoons) and work clandestinely to ascertain the wrong doing of the villagers, or the superintendents and others report them to the king.⁽⁴⁶⁾ In other instance also when people's attention was diverted, these shows performed by the entertainers could also afford opportunities to draw out the enemy from the safety of the fort or for storming it.⁽⁴⁷⁾

Theatre censorship appeared in ancient India, during the time of the universal monarchies of Magadh under the guidance of Ashoka. Ashoka, the devout and pious king was probably influenced by Buddha's views towards performing arts. He had banned the sacrificial killings of animal together with the samajas i.e. merry making, feasting and similar other amusements [Rock.Eddict.1]. This banning of festive gathering was totally against the image of the benevolent and tolerant king. He however approved of good samājas or those sponsored by the state.⁽⁴⁸⁾ Ashoka being a benevolent despot had wanted to control all aspects of his subjects' lives and dictated their course of action which would be morally suitable.⁽⁴⁹⁾ The prohibition of these secular gatherings might have been a puritanical objection on the part of a pious king. Ashoka considered the samajas as immoral as an economic waste for society.⁽⁵⁰⁾

Drama was however, an integral part of ancient Indian urban life. Even the ancient law-givers who vilified and defamed this group of performing artists accepted their importance in society. Apastamba mentioned that the king had to build an assembly hall in the city for the performance of dancing, singing, music and shows of arms.⁽⁵¹⁾ Narada even forbade the king from confiscating the various musical instruments of musicians, tools of artisans, weapons of soldiers, ornaments of public women i.e. any implement by which the artificer gained livelihood. Narada also exempted the property of stage players like the alms of Brahmanas from taxation.⁽⁵²⁾ Among several types of gifts made to different persons only those were considered valid by Narada among which was the gift paid for an amusement i.e. given to a bard, euologist or like persons.⁽⁵³⁾ Vashishtha also advocated that the alms received by Brahmanas, the property of actors, singers and what may be carried on one's shoulders should be exempted from taxation. He also added that there was to be no tax on a livelihood gained by art, nor on messenger nor on what has been received as alms, nor on the remnants of property left after a robbery, nor on an ascetic, nor on a sacrifice.⁽⁵⁴⁾ Manu however advised a king to treat the bards like menial servants and workmen.⁽⁵⁵⁾ Yajnavalkya also prescribed singing and dancing as a diversion for kings.⁽⁵⁶⁾

Drama was undoubtedly an integral part of ancient Indian society. The attainments of the actors and actresses were recognised and appreciated wholeheartedly by the sophisticated elites and intellectuals. However dramatic presentations were mostly meant for the cultured urbanites. Even kings, princes, nobles and courtiers took part in dramatic performances, despite of the stigma attached to the dramatic professionals. The affluence of the actors was also notable.⁽⁵⁷⁾ Thus theoretical strictures were passed against the group as a whole by the lawgivers, but in reality, the dramatic performers enjoyed a lot of affluence and influence in ancient Indian society.

The performing artists had always been at the receiving end of the censorial red eyes of the moral police of the society. The performing artists in general and the actresses in particular had been condemned and criticized for taking part in a profession, which presented them as objects of desire. Their professional capacity had necessitated that they emphasize their physical beauty and always put up a glamorous image. Yet for this very reason they were vilified and condemned as shallow and narcissistic. The actresses who had also been very proficient in fine arts were thus only commodified and treated as sex objects.

However the performing artists had been an integral part of ancient Indian society as is evident from these works. Morality was the most important issue for these legal minds. The ganikas, custodians of fine arts had formed the major section of the population of performing artists. So the actresses were linked with prostitution since earliest times. And the question of morality and respectability of the theatre personnel did not arise according to ancient Indian society. The issue of patronage became very important for their very existence. The sacrifices they made for their art were never acknowledged by the society and they only remained a pawn in the whole set of rules formed by the moral guardians of the society. The performing artist in general has always been subject to ridicule from the other side. Story of this response has several paradigms. Exercise of power and the exploitative nature of the society have often been reflected in the staging of the performing art. It is the same story across ages and civilizations.

Endnotes

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