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The Influence of Narrative Structure on Indian Traditional Art

INTRODUCTION

A distinctive quality of Indian aesthetics is its wholistic approach to the arts, whereas, in the West there has been an increasing tendency to separate the arts into different "mediums", so that the plastic or visual arts have been put in to one category, while the literary arts, including poetry have been shown to have their own distinctive medium of expression. Then in yet another group are the performing arts, and music has a place all of its own. But in India there has been a movement not so much to distinguish the arts as to find their common denominators. Thus it has been felt that dance drama is the mother of the arts, and that from this, music and poetic literature have derived their force, whereas in the other direction visual or plastic arts have been expressed in the still poetry of carved stone, or painted fresco, the inner joy (*harsha*) which is to be derived from all the arts. The "common denominator" of artistic expression has thus been rhythm (*ritu*) and playfulness which, it has been felt form the very basis of the whole of creation as we experience it in the cosmos.

In our effort to understand the relationship of Indian art to the religious spirit of Hindu thought, I feel it is important to understand more clearly how the dance drama has permeated the whole of Indian visual representations. When the great modern Indian dancer Ram Gopal tried to recover the ancient tradition of Indian classical dance he made a detailed study of examples of Indian temple carving and painting. Everywhere in Indian art we find the graceful form of the dancer. In fact one of the most appealing images of Deity shows Him as Nataraja, or Lord of the Dance.

But this connection with dance and the popular festival stage performances of Myth and Legend, is not the only connection we find between the masterpieces of Indian plastic art, and the ancient tradition of folk dance. Perhaps going back to tribal dance, and further back

even than that to Shamanistic and animistic beliefs of the indigenes, we discover an underlying belief in India that all beautiful forms ultimately derive from cosmic rhythm, which art only reveals, as the sculptor reveals from the matrix of stone, the inner form which his imagination "sees" there, but his skill only serves to "bring out".

The Tamil poet Kambham, describes in his version of the *Rāmāyana*, how the goddess Ahalya ("she who was never ploughed," *Ahalya*, as opposed to *Sita*, "the furrow") was released from the rock where she was imprisoned by a curse. When Rama came, he touched the rock with his feet, as the great Vishnu who measured out the heavens and the earth with his "three steps", each step being in fact the "measure" with which he created cosmos out of chaos. This touch of the feet of Rama, according to Kambham, liberated Ahalya where she had been locked up in the dead stone, giving her once again life.

This act of bringing out living form from dead stone has been from time immemorial the function of the artist. This has, perhaps, also been his religious function, to make visible the invisible, to give form to the formless. The "ritual" of the artist is often a "ritual" of measuring, and giving due proportion so that in Hindu art Iconometry is essential to the magical "power" of the image—its "Maya" (a word which is itself linked to "measure" and "magic").

Delving deep into these aboriginal and mythic origins of the plastic arts, the student may soon find himself in a confusing wealth of poetic imagery, which draws not a little on subconscious, dream-like material. But I have felt it necessary to explore the relation of the visual arts not only to the non-verbal dance performance, but also to the story which the dance-drama as well as the static image enshrine. There has been a strong tendency in Western art theory to discount narrative elements in what are primarily "visual" arts as being in some way super-impositinos and hence constraining elements on the freedom of the artist who is trying to create, after all, a "spectacle". On the other hand, there is certainly an argument in favour of saying that the "narrative" element has the power to *liberate* the visual artist, whether he be a dancer or puppet-operator (working with the visual effects of gesture and the various props of the stage) or a painter or sculptor working with the static, picture-image. I have concluded this essay by saying that the "narrative" is the *form*, not the *content* of Indian art.

The *content* of all art is actually, ultimately *life*. Even in the figure of the comic actor, it is *life* that is being celebrated. There is a basic spirit of joy and life in Indian art—this is its comic quality, understanding “comic” in its true sense as an art dedicated to the service of “Comus” a Greek god of life and vitality. It is in this sense that everywhere in Indian art we find *comic* figures like that of Ganesh or even Hanuman. I once heard of a figure of a monkey depicted relieving himself by passing water. The figure, I was told, stood at the door of a Shakta shrine in South Kanara. This figure, was meant to be “comic”. Laughter is itself a “religious” mood like the “laughing Buddhas” of Far-Eastern art. There is both a trivial and a profound sense where by art is to be understood as entertainment, for the amusement of the people as well as edification.

The relation of Drama to ritual is well-known, and it is clear that there is a close link between temple ritual and the emergence of dramatic performances, as indicated even by the whole tradition of Bharata, a temple priest, to whom is attributed the *Nāṭya Śhāstra* (probably 2nd to 1st cent. B.C.). Even here we suspect a much more ancient practice as dealt with at some length by Paul Riscouer in his book “The Symbolism of Evil”, where by the ritual enactment of the battle of the forces of good and evil, and the creation of the world, has from prehistoric times been the basis of folk festivals. Through this ritual play a community lives out its own identity by establishing through an heroic act the ordered “Kingdom” in the face of cosmic chaos.

Myth of Origins—The discovery of a Fifth Veda

According to a legend concerning the origins of Indian dance, drama there were a whole series of Bharatas, who are listed as Mukutakara, Malayakara, Silpi, Karu, Kusilava, Ganika and so on—and these Bharatas, we are further told by the Dharmasastras were Śudras.¹ But originally, according to the myth, Bharata was in fact an incarnation of a divine Being, architect of the universe, Viswakarma Himself. We are told that at the advent of the Treta Yuga, when there was a falling away from the path of righteousness especially among the common people who had no access to the Vedas which were reserved only for the high castes, the gods, led by Indra, approached the

1. Cf. “Sanskrit Drama” by Prof. G. T. Deshpande in *Indian Drama* (New Delhi: Publications Division of the Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, Government of India, 1956).

Lord Brahma and requested him to give to mankind a fifth Veda which would be available to all, however low their status in society. Consequently, Brahma agreed and took his material from the existing four Vedas, thus bringing together the four basic elements of the work of dramatic art, as understood by Bharata. Thus *Padyā* (the story, text) was derived from the Rig Veda; *Gītā* (the song, music) was derived from the Sama Veda; *Abhinaya* (gesture, acting) from the Yajur Veda; and *Rasā*, aesthetic experience, from the Atharva Veda. The actual task of setting down this new composite Veda was given to Bharata and his hundred sons. This link with the Vedas is further emphasized by the important function in Indian dramatics of the *Sūtradhāra* or story-teller who goes back to the Vedic bards whose *sūtras* are thought to be anterior to the *Laws of Manu*, belonging to a period about the 6th Cent. B. C. These *sūtras* often seem to have taken the form of sacred dialogues (connected possibly with ancient rituals in which gods and demi-gods were addressed, and propitiated). These sacred dialogues² are sometimes called *pad-danas*, and are verbal exchanges (*nudi-katu*) between some numinous spirit and a tribal chief. In the Rig Veda we can find about 20 such ancient dialogues, such as the dialogue between Yama (the god of death) and Yami (the river goddess, his sister) (R. V. 10.10) or again the famous dialogues between the fairy Urvasi, and the earthly hero-king Pururavas (R. V. 10.95) which is itself a mini-drama, probably related to fairy stories to be found all over the world, where a hero loses his fairy bride through his curiosity to "see" her. Another famous dialogue is the conversation between Sarama, the hound of heaven, and the Pani thieves (R. V. 10.108) which again has many folk connections with a tale concerning a wise beast, which has the power to converse. Returning, however, to the myth which is told concerning the origins of sacred drama, we are told that Bharata at the dawn of the Treta Yuga staged a play in which he represented the battle between the gods (*devas*) and the forces of the underworld (*asuras*). It is interesting in the light of what we know about the origins of dramatized ritual that here a universal pattern is again repeated, for in many cultures we are told of a ritual drama in which the battle between opposites (heaven and the underworld, light and darkness, good and evil) is enacted, generally on the occasion of a great festival related to a temple, or an important event such as the

2. S. K. Ramachandra Rao, *The Folk Origins of Indian Temples* (Bangalore: IBH Prakashana, Gandhi Bazar), pp. 34-35.

coronation of a king. In fact we find that this sacred drama is understood in India as a Yajña (that is, a ritual sacrifice) and is from very ancient times connected to the Samaja which are festivals of great antiquity going back to the pre-historic folk memory, probably rooted in tribal custom, as it existed perhaps in the Janapadas, or tribal republics of the North-Indian Indo-Gangetic plain which was the fertile ground from which both Buddhist and Jain religious cultures sprang. The *Rāmāyaṇa* and the *Mahābhārata* seem to have a similar folk basis, as both lead up to a dramatic battle between two opposing forces, characterized as good and evil. By this dramatic event a new order is established, a new cosmos is founded. But it is interesting, however, to find our myth telling us that this initial drama composed on the occasion of the flag-hoisting festival of Indra, at the beginning of this age, by the divine play-wright Bharata, was not well received because the demons did not appreciate being depicted in only negative terms. So Bharata composed another play; this time showing a co-operative effort between gods and demons, when the two diametrically opposite forces of the cosmos came together to churn the cosmic ocean of milk. Here in the symbol of the churning stick worked by pulling a cord in opposite directions, the stress and strain of contrary forces were harmonized in that one effort to transform the ocean of primal chaos into a new product, a new level of consciousness. Taking hold of the two ends of the great serpent Śeṣha (who is also the milky way) the gods (devas) and demons (asuras) worked together in one rhythm, turning the churning rod, which is the axis of the universe, the primal cosmic tree. As the myth tells us, from this churning strange and powerful substances were extricated from the primal flux of the ocean, the final and triumphant product being *amrita*, or the elixir of Life itself. When this draught of immortality emerged from the oceans, both the gods and the demons who had co-operated in the churning of the ocean, vied with each other to drink this blessed elixir. The gods now saw a new danger, for by drinking of this life-giving substance, the demons would also be rendered invincible. So at this stage the gods devised a plan to deceive the demons. One of the gods (Visnu) appeared before the assembled hosts in the form of Mohini, the beautiful enchantress of the worlds, and danced with such magic art before the assembly that the demons were enthralled and forgot completely about the life-giving elixir. In this way the gods were able to steal away the *amrita*, and use it only for themselves. Here we find a parable within a parable concerning the origins of artistic illusion. Mohini is the

essence of the dramatic art, and is able with her magic to lead the minds of the lower forces of the cosmos, away from the ultimate reality of eternal life. In the temple of Belur, which according to some scholars was originally intended as a sort of holy theatre or *raṅga-maṇḍapa* with the famous brackets depicting the dancing temple girls or forest fairies, there is in the centre of the *maṇḍala-like* structure of the temple space a pillar on which is carved the beautiful figure of Mohini, the enchantress who is the essence of art.

Aboriginal Origins of Dramatic Art

The Indian myth which we have described concerning the origins of drama is of interest because it throws light not only on the connection between the truly archaic mystery play, and a ritual enactment concerning the creation of the world out of primal chaos, but it also introduces the fascinating problem of dramatic illusion itself. It is well-known that in India the world itself is thought of as play- (*līla*)- from a root-word meaning to shine or sparkle with many colours; or again *Māyā*, a word etymologically connected with magic. But what is further related by our story concerning the origin of the *Nāṭya śāstra* is a belief that this is a sacred Veda (scriptural tradition) available to all, whatever their status in society, and in fact especially appropriate for those who otherwise have no access to the scriptures of the Hindus. In fact, what the myth may be telling us is that dance-drama went back further than the Vedas to an aboriginal culture, indigenous to the people. The myth does not so much describe the origins of this dramatic art of the common people, as give the sanction for its incorporation into the Hindu ethos. Of course the idea that mystery plays, and art itself, is *biblia pauperum*, that is, "scripture for the poor", is a common enough idea. In medieval Christendom, the churches were lavishly decorated with paintings, and stained glass windows, depicting the various incidents in the gospel narrative concerning the life of Christ, and also Old Testament stories, with the *specific* intention of making, through visual representation, these stories available to those who could not read. Western drama is founded on the tradition of mystery plays, which, like the Sanskrit *prekshas*, were one-act scenes from sacred scripture often enacted in the Church itself in conjunction with the liturgy, to bring home to the people the stories of ancient acts which the liturgy itself was sacramentally re-enacting. These plays were closely connected with the

cycle of yearly festivals and celebrations, through which the common people made their daily life meaningful.

It is important for us to understand, however, the proper role of this fifth Veda of folk culture. It is not simply a potted version of the other four Vedas, as the myth might seem to suggest. No more is the great church art of Christendom simply *biblia pauporum* as the clerics called it rather condescendingly, in that it is not just the illustration of a text which the poor could not read. This fifth Veda of sacred art has to be given a place of honour on its own. What is narrated by art cannot simply be revealed in words. The fact that this dramatic art is a composite of story, song, spectacle, and acting, makes it a medium quite different from the simple literary text. The art of the *sutradhāra* is an art not only of words, but of gesture (*abhinaya*) and also pictures, in that it seems clear that from very ancient times the story-teller used visible images to tell his story, as much as he used words. It is this bringing together both of what is seen and what is heard in the dramatic event which gives to Bharata's concept of *rasā*, or aesthetic experience, its unique value. Bharata's understanding of *rasa* is closely connected with the whole experience of the theatre performance which as the word *Preksha* itself suggests, was something *seen*, something witnessed by the audience in such a way that all their senses were engaged, giving them a total impression of virtual life. The essence of drama is that it not only recounts past happenings (*itihāsa*), but it *presents* the event in the form of a virtual world on the stage. The audience lives the drama, and so the *rasā* of dramatic narrative is like the *amrita* which came out of the primal flood—it gives to those who partake of it a greater measure of life, so that they too, like the gods, seem to have the gift of everlasting life. This is the magical power of the dramatic illusion. Perhaps the reason why the drama has such a compulsive appeal to the imagination of simple people, is that it reaches down to more unconscious levels, closer to what is more primal and therefore more instinctive in man, which it has the power to fascinate with a world of dream-like reality. What we are now becoming increasingly aware of is that what we call "reality" is in fact very much determined by our own creative power to organize that reality into meaningful dramatic events. In a way, we cannot experience the world around us as real, until we can re-constitute the raw stuff of our daily experiences into what might be called the "drama of life". That is, we perceive what is meaningful to us within the structure of dramatic form. Here distinctions of

virtual as opposed to the actual, illusion as opposed to the real, break down because we find that we can only appreciate the real within the forms of our own imaginative creations. This is the social importance of drama, that it not only provides an escape from the often meaningless drudgery of day-to-day life, but it has the power to give every individual's self-perception, and vision of the world in which he lives, a new meaning in the light of dramatic form. Thus an individual who has been profoundly moved by a dramatic performance finds that the reason why it moves him is precisely because he discovers in it the meaning of his own life, and is able to see his own life events in the perspective of a dramatic sequence.

Dance and drama are closely connected in Indian culture, *Nrityā* (dance) being etymologically closely connected to *Nāṭya* (drama) in the Sanskrit language. Going back to neolithic times, dance-drama was part of magical rites intended to gain control over the living forces of nature. Thus, for example, dance rituals where the *shaman* even wore a mask of some animal, were associated with the hunt, and the need which man felt to gain control over the animal kingdom. In the South of India the possessed *shaman*, who often dances in ecstasy and carries on a virtual dialogue with the spirit world, is called *Kodangi*, meaning 'monkey-brat'. This *Kodangi* figure appears in the *Yakshagana* and other folk forms of drama as a kind of jester, who is also very wise, and can see into the hearts of the audience. His function, in a way, is to mediate between the audience, that is the common folk, and the spirit-world of the gods and devils. The people love this trickster-joker because he represents the capacity in man to survive at any cost, no matter what the odds against him. This is the essence of comedy; the celebration of the perennial forces of life, which despite every hazard, setback and folly, has an irresistible capacity to come out victorious in the end. The fool entertains the audience with his audacity, his foolish lack of respect for the powers that be, and yet has in ample measure his endearing capacity to survive.

In this connection we might mention the close relation that exists between folk drama, and the festivals of Yakshas and Apsaras. Yakshas were ancient gods of the vegetation in rural India, sort of hobgoblins, while the Apsaras were charming nymphs or fairies who also exercised control over the forces of fertility. It seems from references to the worship of Yakshas in early Buddhist texts like *Jatakas*, that connected with the Yakshas was a ritual enactment of their *līlas*, that

is, their legendary acts. Here, under the spreading branches of a great tree, the Yaksha of a locality is propitiated by dance-drama. This is undoubtedly the origin of folk drama like the Yakshagana in Karnataka, which developed from being just the typical celebration of country deities, to the commemoration of the creation of the world in the *purānic* form of the *daśa-avatāras*, and later, to take on epic narratives related to materials from the *Mahābhārata* and the *Rāmāyana* as a slow and steady process of sanskritization³ crept in and the ancient folk drama came to be used as a means for spreading the new chivalric view of the world as found in Hindu feudalism and the emerging caste system.

But even in the later, more developed plays we find the old village deities surviving. A good example would be Ganesh who has clear links with the early gods of the soil. He too is a trickster, joker figure, with a body typical of the ancient dwarf-like gods called Gaṇas, who were associated with the pre-Aryan god Shiva. There are indications that Shiva as Lord of the dance (*Natarāja*) goes back to the Indus-Valley Civilization where we find a proto-Shiva who is Paśupati, or Lord of the beasts, like the Greek Dionysius who was also the patron of the theatre. Siva was also Nataraja or Lord of the dance-drama. Among the Indus Valley finds we have a small torso of a dancing figure, which seems to have jointed arms and legs rather like a very sophisticated puppet. There is also a dancing nude female figure, with heavy bangles, which some scholars have interpreted as being a *devadasi*, a temple dancer. We have even a mask excavated from Mohenjodaro. The mask is an important aspect of the sacred drama, called in Sanskrit *pratishirsha*. The earliest mention of the mask which we have is in Kautilya's *Arthashastra* (4th-3rd Cent. B.C.).

The Voice of the Common Folk

We have already noted that the dance-drama of Indian folk culture was meant to be the 5th Veda for those who were of low caste and therefore, could not have access to the four Vedas which were reserved only for the high caste. But though, according to the myth, the tradition of dance-drama came after the earlier, eternal scriptures of the Vedas, we have suggested that in fact the dance-drama is the older

3. Romila Thapar, *Exile and Kingdom* (Bangalore: Mythic Society, 1978), pp. 23-24.

tradition going back to ancient neolithic magical rites and already quite developed in the Mohenjodaro civilization. Perhaps even with the concept of a god of drama (like the Greek god Dionysius) who is also, *Paśupati* or Lord of the beasts, and connected with the Gaṇas, Yakshas and Apsaras, the nature deities, he was propitiated with the dance, and commemorated by short one-act plays.⁴

The incorporation of folk dance-drama into the temple ritual is thus an attempt to give sanction to a very popular pre-Aryan culture which gradually asserted itself. Coomaraswamy in his monograph on Yakshas and their representation in Indian art⁵ points out the connection between the worship offered to the Yakshas and Bhakti cults, showing that Yakshas were often termed "Bhagavat" a term very much in use in Bhakti devotions. The narrator of the South Indian dance-drama *Yakshagana* is also called *Bhagawat*, and this ancient form of dance-drama opens with a *pūja*, or a *bhakti* rite of worship, generally given to Ganesha, who is also patron of the dance. Bhakti religion as it spread in India was also very much a cult of the common people, emphasizing as it did, that whatever your caste or status in society, it is your personal devotion to the Lord which matters.

It is rather surprising to note that not only the actors of the drama but all artists and craftsmen in India are supposed to belong to the lowest caste or out-castes. Manu specifically lays down that those who dance and act in plays are of the lowest caste, and in fact were associated with prostitution. Even the Brahmins who were responsible later for directing plays, and perhaps even writing them, were shunned as in some way inferior to other Brahmins. It is not surprising then to find that in many ways Indian folk drama articulates through its comic or satirical figure of the jester, who is also close to the narrator or Bhagavat, the aspirations and criticisms of the common folk. For this

4. Cf. G. T. Deshpande, "Sanskrit Drama" in *Indian Drama* (New Delhi, 1956), p. 16. Cf. also M. L. Varadpande, *Traditions of Indian Theatre* (New Delhi: Abhinava Publications, 1979), p. 9, where connection with folk theatre and festivals is emphasised. Cf. also "Bengali Drama and Stage" by Prabod G. Sen in *Indian Drama*, *op. cit.* p. 39. Also for its connection with the *padyas*; cf. D. P. Ghosh, *Folk Art of Bengal* (Calcutta: Dept. of History of Art, Kala Bhavan, Visva Bharati, 1977).

5. Cf. A. K. Coomaraswamy, "Yaksha Worship and Bhakti Cult" in *Yakshas* (Smithsonian Miscellaneous Collections, Washington, Vol. 80, No. 6, 1928,) p. 27.

reason the popular festival (*Samaj* or *Jatra*) was regarded with considerable suspicion by the high castes, and efforts were made to control it, and taxes were even levied on those who organized folk theatre. This theatre was quite often not allowed to establish itself in the cities, or even villages, because of its supposed subversive nature and was thus very much a street theatre though later it became popular as part of temple festivals and with the rising regional Hindu dynasties, *ranga mandapas*, or dance-drama halls generally consisting of an open square space with pillars and a roof were a usual feature of temple or palace complexes. It is interesting to note that Bharata says that the theatre stage should be modelled on a cave and there are indications to show that ancient Indian theatres were in fact connected with cave architecture, as also much of early Indian art.⁶

The staged performance is not just a re-enactment of heroic deeds of the past; it is also a drama which is made *present*. That is to say, the audience experiences the play in the historic now and ultimately the play speaks to their present condition. The importance of *abhinaya* is the rapport the actor has to establish with his audience. A drama does not only have a text, it has also a context. According to Indian aesthetics what qualifies an audience as appreciative or not is its empathy or *sahridaya*—a state of common heart with the main theme of the action on the stage. That is why the actor has to constantly re-interpret the story to suit the heart of his audience.

There is a basic tension between what is represented on the stage and how it is represented, between, in fact, the actor and the narrator. On the Indian stage the narrator (*sutradhāra* or *bhāgavata*) and the clown (*vidūshaka*) establish an immediate rapport with the audience and make the epic deeds enacted on the stage relevant to the historic concerns of the common folk. Here another tension can be noted. It is certainly true that folk theatre, while somewhat suspect among the high caste, was used by the high caste to propagate among the common folk its own ideologies. Thus the great epics of the *Rāmāyaṇa* and the *Mahābhārata* were spread through the whole countryside, so much so that it would be hard to find a villager who has not some knowledge of the main events in these epic stories acquired largely through popular performing arts, whether on the village stage, or through puppet shows, shadow plays, and even the narrations of

6. Cf. M. L. Varadpande, *op. cit.* pp. 9-10.

one-man story-tellers who used pictures to illustrate their stories. These stories were further popularized by works of art found all over the countryside. The stories are so well-known that they no longer have to be "explained", any more than the Mass has to be explained to a born Roman Catholic. It forms part of the fabric of life, and thus the stories provide in a way their own context through a perennial process of re-interpretation and re-living in the every day culture of the people. The dramatic arts were one of the prime channels for the advancing of the process known as sanskritization in that they familiarized the people not only with the stories of the epics, but also with the world view, and the assumed importance of the social system which the epics themselves extolled. For example, the *Rāmāyana* boldly proclaims that a people who are not ruled by a king are without law and order. As a result the rising monarchies could see in the chivalric ideals of the great epic sanction for their own kingly ambitions. Right down to Gandhi the term "Ram Rajya" became synonymous with righteous rule and in fact the Kingdom of Heaven on earth. Implicitly the epics proclaimed as normative the Hindu *dharma-karma* system with its social hierarchies established in the *varanas* with the dominance of Brahmin and Kshatriya. But what of all those peasants and tribals who were *śūdras* or outcastes? Would they accept this high caste propaganda just passively?

Here we note the interesting function of the *vidushaka* or villain-joker, with whom the peasantry felt a very warm sense of fellow-feeling. The *vidushaka* is in fact the anti-hero, the debunker of the very ideals normative to the epic. His role is often not clearly defined in the text because what he has to say is by way of extemporary comment on the main plot of the drama—it is playing to the audience, and as such is close to the story-teller's art. His job is to create interest and to make the apposite aside. He mediates between the heroic figures and the common folk.

If the Indian Drama is essentially comic (nowhere, one might argue, will you find the tragic spirit of Greek Drama on the Indian stage), then we might extend this observation to the whole of Indian art, where the comic spirit is very important. When we speak of comedy in this sense we do not just mean the funny play, but rather a play which celebrates life, as the Greek cult of *Comus* (at which the comedy was enacted) celebrated the fertility and perennial vibrant

humour of nature. Susanne Langer in her book *Feeling and Form* comments:

In Asia the designation "Divine Comedy" would fit numberless plays : especially in India triumphant gods, divine lovers united after various trials (as in the perennial romance of Rama and Sita) are the favourite themes of a theatre that knows no "tragic rhythm". . . . The reason for this consistently "comic" image of life in India is obvious enough; both Hindu and Buddhist regard life as an episode in the much longer career of the soul which has to accomplish many incarnations before it reaches its goal, *nirvāṇa*. Its struggles in the world do not exhaust it; in fact they are scarcely worth recording except in entertainment theatre, "comedy" in our sense, satire, farce, and dialogue. The characters whose fortunes are seriously interesting are the eternal gods; and for them there is no death, no limit of potentialities, hence no fate to be fulfilled. There is only the balanced rhythm of sentience and motion, upholding itself amid the changes of material nature.''⁷

The episodic structure of Indian theatre, the fact that "Preksha" was in reality a one-act play, a sort of "glimpse" into the myth of eternity, has itself influenced the whole representation of time and space in the arts. The fact that play was basically street-theatre and intimately connected with processions as part even of certain rites of passage, has given to the Indian narrative theatre a certain open-endedness, as though the actors have been pictured here in a brief incident on their way, rather like a passing tableau in the Catholic "stations of the Cross". Here what is important is not the unity of time and space, but the fact that it flows.

The Influence of Folk theatre on the Visual Arts of India

Indian aesthetics is based on the ideas of Bharata, as has already been noted. Bharata was writing specifically in connection with folk theatre. The concept of *rasā* in Bharata is the aesthetic experience of the dramatic spectacle. Though later Ananda Vardhana applied this concept to the more specific field of poetics originally, it seems clear,

7. Cf. Susanne Langer, *Feeling and Form* (New York: Charles Scribners & Sons, 1958), p. 335.

the term was much more wide in its application, arising out of the total impression of story, acting, song and also visual impact. In that way *rasā* has always been understood to apply both to word and image.⁸

Image structure is based on concepts of space, and so the relation of the actors to the stage has been vital in forming the conventions of depicting the relation between figures and the space they occupy in Indian plastic arts. Everywhere in Indian representational art we find the structure of the *maṇḍapa*, or open-air stage with pillars supporting a flat roof, as a convenient frame in which to set the action of the figures, as we find also in the traditional stage which is set up in a temporary fashion out of poles supporting a flat awning, made out of some woven fabric, or a thatch-work of leaves or straw.

But underlying these visual conventions of representing figures within a stage-like setting, which has little depth, but is conceived of laterally as a procession of figures arranged parallel to the viewer-audience, there is at a more profound level an understanding of art as arising out of narrative. In the West, where increasingly a distinction has been drawn between pure art, and illustration (a sort of applied art, bound to a written text), there has been a tendency to repudiate the narrative element of visual or plastic arts. These arts have been understood only in terms of their visual effect and not in relation to the story they convey. As I mentioned above, we must not understand by "story" just the spoken or written verbal account of that story. Even a mime or a tableau can tell a story with absolutely no recourse to words. Where a story differs from a simple spectacle is in its reference to an event, or series of events, and its function as virtual memory not so much of something static, as a process of happening involving persons. It is in this sense that Indian art is understood as *Itihāsa*, that is "Heroic history" (as defined in Dawson's Classical Dictionary).

In the story, what is important is the sense of time, and progression.⁹ As traditional folk theatre emerged out of the dance, and

8. Cf. S. S. Barlingay, "What did Bharata mean by *Rasā*" in *Indian Philosophical Quarterly*, Vol. VIII, No. 4, 1981): The author of this essay argues that *rasā* for Bharata was specifically the language of staging, and not just of poetic metaphor. What is being hinted at here is a wholistic approach to art in which aesthetic experience is finally achieved through the bringing together of all the arts, plastic as well as narrative as in the dance-drama.

9. Cf. C. Sivaramamurti, *Time in Indian Art* (Bangalore: Mythic Society, 1981).

ritualized processions at the time of important festivals, we discover that in the plastic images of India it is the sense of flowing rhythm which gives the basic structure to the sequence of images. Even the Indian temple is designed in such a way as to allow for movement, and processions within the sacred space. *Parikrama* or *pradakshana*, that is the ritual circumambulation of the sacred area, is an ancient rite going back even to Yaksha worship, where the worshipper circumambulated the tree under which was a stone platform, very much like a simple rustic theatre. The actors in the folk drama come to the stage making their way through the audience. The primary movement is one of circling round the stage.

Around the galleries of the temple we find bands of images, either painted or in low relief. The prescribed movement is always clockwise, and it is in this way that the images have to be read. The image world is a parallel world to the world of here and now. The pilgrim processing round the temple sees at his side the parallel procession of heavenly actors, whose long frieze of dancing, moving figures, convey the story of life, the *lila* of their appearance before the eyes of men. Time is also shown iconographically in the form of the *daśa avatārās* (which was also the basic theme of the ancient Yakshagana theatre of Karnataka) or the long waving serpentine body of Shesha, who is the timeless endless one (*Ananta*) which the gods and demigods heave back and forth in the endless rhythm of the churning of the cosmic oceans.

This sense of the endless cycle of time also conveys the idea of life itself as a brief period on a stage, in which the individual soul (*ātman*) is itself only an actor. The mask used in the ritual dance has been an important iconographic symbol in the plastic arts as well. Faces are not individualized but have a mask-like impersonality. They are not so much individual appearances of particular beings as assumed "roles" such as we find in the drama, which further convey the impression that the world of appearances is like the spectacle on a stage. What we see is only the mask, a semblance of reality. Indian art, like the symbolic theatre, revels in its own "artificiality". Its "truth" is, in fact, the open way in which it proclaims itself to be a dream, a virtual performance upon a constructed stage. The devotee is invited finally to discover the reality in the very shock of finding that the world he sees is ultimately unreal.

Indian visual arts are closely connected with narrative. The image tells a story, and this story is part of the very fabric of daily life as it is lived by the common people. The image does not "inform", but it represents. The people are very familiar with the story, and it is for that reason that they can approach the image with a complete sense of recognition. The picture does not have to be explained because the story is known to everybody in the culture. The image thus arises out of a total context and can speak directly to the hearts of the people without the interfering question "what is it about?" Because the story is so familiar the image can become transparent, a pure vehicle for feeling. When we do not know what a gesture means it becomes opaque to us; our minds are caught up with the intellectual problem of finding out its significance. But when the gesture is familiar it speaks directly to us and is able to convey the inner feeling of the person who acts. The function, therefore, of the story (*kathā, padyā*) is to make the gesture (*abhinaya*) explicit, and therefore to allow the aesthetic experience (*rasā*) to flow freely. Those who are unfamiliar with the form, cannot get at the content. Only by being thoroughly conversant with the explicit subject of a work of art can the inner emotional power of the image make itself felt.

Here we note a curious fact. The narrative element of Indian art is not its content, but its form. The story element is like the outer vessel, but the inner living juice (*rasā*) is the aesthetic experience. "Illustrational" art makes of the story a content—what the picture is meant to convey. But in Indian art theory what the audience ultimately come to witness in the drama, festival, or plastic representation, is not really just the story, but the inner experience of joy or bliss, of which the story is only the occasion.