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Girish Karnad 2002

The Natyasastra is one of the world's earliest treatises on theatre. It dates back to at least the third century B.C. and its first chapter tells the story of the Birth of Drama.

It was a time when the world was sunk in moral turpitude. People had become slaves to irrational passions. A new means had to be found ("pleasing to the eyes and ears as well as edifying") which could uplift humanity. So Brahma, the Creator, combined elements from the four Vedas (sacred texts) to form a fifth text, the Veda of Performance. But since the gods are not capable of the discipline of drama, the new Veda was passed on to Bharata, a human being. And Bharata, with the help of his hundred sons, and some celestial dancers sent by Brahma, staged the first play. The gods enthusiastically contributed to the enhancement of the expressive possibilities of the new art.

The play Bharata presented dealt with the history of the conflict between the gods and the demons, and celebrated the ultimate victory of the gods. The production delighted the gods and the humans. But the demons in the audience were deeply offended. They therefore used their supernatural powers and disrupted the performance by paralyzing the speech, movements and memory of the actors. The gods in turn attacked the demons and killed many of them.

Mayhem ensued. So Brahma, the Creator, approached the demons and spoke to them. Drama, he explained, is the representation of the state of the three worlds. It incorporates the ethical goals of life – the spiritual, the secular and the sensuous--its joys and sorrows. There is no wisdom, no art, no emotion which is not found in it.

He then asked Bharata to proceed with the performance. We are not told if the second performance was any more of a success.

Scholars commenting on this chapter take it for granted that the myth condemns the demons. Their behaviour is seen to prove they had failed to comprehend the true nature of theatre. Brahma's discourse on theatre then becomes the essence of the myth..

That, it seems to me, is to misunderstand the myth entirely. For a start, the fact that the demons (unlike the gods) do not resort to physical violence but attack only the "speech, movements and memory" of the actors shows a remarkable grasp of the finer aspects of performance.

More to the point, here is a revered text, written to instruct us in the art and techniques of play-production, talking of the very first performance in the history of humanity. The Creator himself, along with other gods, celestial nymphs and trained actors, was involved in the project. The result should have been a thundering success.

Instead, we are told it was a disaster.

There is an implicit statement here that scholars have avoided looking at. Possibly they are embarrassed by it. Certainly the implications fly in the face of the later Indian aesthetics which asserts that the main purpose of theatre is to detach the audience from the world outside and ease it into a shared state of delectation.

The myth, it seems to me, is pointing to an essential characteristic of theatre which Brahma's placatory remarks could not possibly acknowledge, that every performance - however carefully devised - carries within itself the risk of failure, of disruption and therefore of violence. The minimum that a live performance requires is a human being performing (that is, pretending to be someone else) and another one watching him or her, and that is a situation already fraught with uncertainty.

The world has never before had as much drama as today. Radio, films, television and video inundate us with drama. But while these forms can engage or even enrage the audience, in none of them can the viewer's response alter the artistic event itself. The Myth of the First Performance points out that in theatre, the playwright, the performers and the audience form a continuum, but one which will always be unstable and therefore potentially explosive.

That is why theatre is signing its own death warrant when it tries to play too safe. On the other hand, that is also the reason why, although its future often seems bleak, theatre will continue to live and to provoke.