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THE SĀMĀNYĀBHINAYA  
OR  
HOW TO PLAY THE GAME

The *sāmānyābhinaya*, the account of which only appears in chapter XXII of the *Nāṭyaśāstra*<sup>1</sup> — that is, rather late, has embarrassed both theorists and exegetes. It is true that the acting process, or *abhinaya*, is developed on two occasions within the Treatise where it is firstly defined as a fourfold element including *āṅgikābhinaya*, or corporal acting, *vācikābhinaya*, or vocal acting, *sātvikābhinaya*, or emotional acting, and *ahāryābhinaya*, or ornamental acting. Gesture, Voice, Emotion and Make-up: such is the epitome of the actor's art.

And yet in chapters XXII and XXV, we are presented with a twofold classification of the *abhinaya* consisting of a *sāmānyābhinaya* and a *citrābhinaya*. What are these new categories, and, moreover, how can one understand and reconcile these two kinds of classification, the latter, double, and the former, quadruple? Of course the answer to those questions is to be found within the *Abhinavabhāratī* itself. Whereas the *abhinaya*, when presented as quadruple, consists of an inventory of elementary acting techniques, the *sāmānyābhinaya* and the *citrābhinaya* actually represent the same techniques when put into practice on the stage

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1. Attributed to a mythical author, Bharata, the treatise whose date is very uncertain, has generally been placed between 200 B.C. and 200 A.D.

Though sometimes at the cost of a few corrections, we shall constantly refer to the Parimal edition, vol. III (*Nāṭyaśāstra* of Bharatamuni with the commentary *Abhinavabhāratī*, ed. by R. S. NAGAR, Delhi-Ahmedabad, Parimal publications, 1983, Parimal Sanskrit Series n. 4).

by the actor in the specific context of a performance and subject to rigorously codified procedures. Hence the necessity of a new statement whereby the actor will initiate himself into these rules of interpretation unknown to him as yet.

I shall presently devote all my attention to the *sāmānyābhinaya*. Of the meanings suggested by etymology, Abhinavagupta retains for the *sāmānyābhinaya* that of «homogeneous acting», which he immediately explains through the means of a very remarkable image where the actor is compared to the perfumer<sup>2</sup>:

«In the manner of the perfumer who, after having the sweet-smelling substances brought from the merchant's stall, makes a homogeneous mixture while saying to himself: 'so much of this one and that one first', in the same manner [the homogeneous mixture of] the *abhinayas* [is achieved in the *sāmānyābhinaya* presented] in this chapter<sup>3</sup>».

The sweet-smelling substances — or, in other terms, the basic ingredients — are, of course, the four categories of *abhinayas*, as they are presented in the first chapters. The scent resulting from the making of multiplicity into oneness is the *sāmānyābhinaya*.

In its turn, the *sāmānyābhinaya* — and, for that matter, the *citrābhinaya* too — is open to division, so that there are a *sāttvika*, a *śārīra* and a *vācikasāmānyābhinaya*<sup>4</sup>. I would now like to undertake the presentation of the homogeneous corporal acting — or *śārīrasāmānyābhinaya*. Various combinations of the elementary performing techniques constitute its sextuple register, although the *āhāryābhinaya* is nearly excluded from it on the ground of its achieved character. In effect, the *sāmānyābhinaya*, the essence of which is activity (or *kriyā*), calls upon the other three *abhinayas*

2. For the translation of the passages borrowed from the *Nāṭyaśāstra* and the *Abhinavabhāratī*, we have given in parenthesis the Sanskrit terms conveying the key notions of the text and we have added in square brackets the words or sentence elements that seemed indispensable for understanding the coherence of ideas or for improving their presentation.

3. *yathā hi kirāṭagrāhād gandhadravayānyāntya gāndhikena samānikriyate asy-eyān bhāga idaṃ pūrvam iti, evam atrādhyāye 'bhinayāḥ*. ABh. [= *Abhinavabhāratī*] ad NŚ [= *Nāṭyaśāstra*] XXII 1, p. 142.

4. On the two-fold way of classifying the *abhinaya*, cf. Chart 1.

yet to be achieved, that is the *vācika*, the *āṅgika* and the *sāttvikābhīnayas*<sup>5</sup>.

Indeed, when performing, the actor has no choice left but to use all or part of this sextuple register which, under the species of a genuine procedure of acting, displays in order the *vākyābhīnaya*, the *sūcā*, the *aṅkura*, the *śākhā*, the *nātyāyita* and the *nivṛtṭyaṅkura* defined in chapter XXII by *kārikās* 44 to 50. And yet the classification does not stop there, since certain of these categories are in turn complex: thus is the *vākyābhīnaya* quadruple, the *sūcā*, hexadecuple, and the *nātyāyita*, double<sup>6</sup>.

The first of these registers, the *vākyābhīnaya*<sup>7</sup>, is corporal acting simultaneous with the enunciation of the text, which is, after all, the most commonly used acting in Western theatre. The *Abhinavabhāratī* divides the *vākyābhīnaya* into four categories according to whether the text is in Sanskrit or in Prākṛit, in verse or in prose.

The *sūcā*<sup>8</sup>, which is next on the list, goes further than the *vākyābhīnaya* with a two-phase process which aims to reproduce on the stage what happens in reality where the ideation precedes the enunciation. In the same way, in the theatre, the *sūcā* is organized in a mute phase which conveys through Gesture the character's interior reflection followed by a verbal phase, which is nothing the *vākyābhīnaya*. And in the same way as, in life, all thoughts find their outward expression through the body, similarly, in the theatre, the initial phase of the *sūcā* is as necessarily outwardly expressed through Gesture — that is, through an *āṅgikābhīnaya*. Abhinavagupta calls it *sūcābhīnaya* because of its definition as the silent coming into being of an internal speech, and, in a simultaneous way, as the outline (*sūcana*) of the external speech to come.

As to what we learn from the *Nāṭyaśāstra* — namely that in the *sūcābhīnaya* we find at some times an indication concerning the

5. This is the summary of Abhinavagupta's long commentary on *NŚ* XXII 1, pp. 140-144.

6. Cf. Chart 2.

7. *NŚ* XXII 44, p. 162. *Vākyābhīnaya* means literally «verbal acting».

8. *NŚ* XXII 45, p. 163. *Sūcā* means «indicative acting».

sentence (*vākya*), and at other times an indication concerning its meaning (*vākyaārtha*), one should understand that this silent expression through Gesture is meant to convey in advance, respectively, the order or disorder of the speech to be uttered and performed at the next stage: that of the *vākyaābhinaya*. On the level of theatre-practice, this probably amounts to saying that, in the former instance, the actor's analytical acting details and displays the sentence word after word, or even sometimes — as is made possible by Indian theatre —, syllabe after syllabe; whereas in the latter case, synthetic acting is what renders the meaning of the sentence, apart from its structuring elements and the way they are linked together.

So, as just stated, the *sūcābhinaya* forestalls the consistent or inconsistent speech to come, now showing the sentence, now its meaning both of which in turn are meant to divide into two levels of alternative depending on whether the sentence is in Sanskrit or in Prākṛit, in verse or in prose. That way, we get for the first phase as a whole eight possibilities which the second phase, reproducing the scheme, multiplies by two. Hence, within one acting register only, the existence of sixteen possibilities that may be listed in a table (see chart II). A dizzy classification indeed, which is the outcome of a faultless analysis of theatrical reality. In effect, the performing of the text amounts to playing upon the specific set of combinations which constitutes it: it is in Sanskrit or in Prākṛit, in verse or in prose, in order or in disorder.

From the following *kārikā* which defines the *aṅkura*<sup>9</sup>, we learn that it is essentially constituted of the *āṅgika* and *sāttvikābhinaya* — which is as much as to say that, leaving the use of the twig-limbs (*śākhā*) to the similarly-called *abhinaya*, it summons the body (*aṅga*), the face (*upāṅga*) and the *sattva*.

As may be learnt from the *Nāṭyaśāstra* as early as chapter VIII this acting register intends to show the meaning, without having recourse to speech: «the *aṅkura* is suggestion» (*aṅkuraḥ sūcanā bhavet*)<sup>10</sup>. Necessarily coming after the utterance of a speech (or,

9. *NŚ* XXII 46, p. 164. Let us bear in mind that *aṅkura* means «bud».

10. *NŚ* VIII 15a.

in the *śārīrasāmānyābhīnaya* ceremonial process, the *aṅkura* comes after the verbal phase of the *sūcā*), it reveals in effect the latent meanings of this speech, so secret sometimes that even the speaker himself may well be unaware of them. Through this display of the implicit, the *aṅkura* accounts for its name of «bud-acting», since, as Abhinavagupta reminds us, the bud means at once the completion of a process (the long and difficult one that starts with the seed) and the beginning of a second process, insofar as the bud is as well, and above all, the promise of the flower to come<sup>11</sup>.

To such an extent, the *aṅkura* may be considered to be a real theatrical exegesis, which is left to the actor's initiative. Thus, when in Act I of *Ratnāvalī Sāgarikā*, excluded from the homage to Kāma and barred from love, says to herself: «After picking up these flowers, I too will honor Kāmadeva», it is up to the actress to understand that the maiden really means as if unknown to herself: «I too want to love and be loved». Similarly, it is up to the actress to recognize an opportunity for an *aṅkura* in the picking up of flowers, which is only meant as a pretext for her to give way to the flow of feelings and emotions by which the heroine is being overwhelmed: the violent disorder which is grasping her, her desire to be beautiful and loved, the happiness derived from it, and many more feelings. In effect, what the *aṅkura* actually shows<sup>12</sup> is, not the words acted one after the other, but the feelings (*sthāyibhāva* and *sañcāribhāva*) experienced by the character.

And, what is more, — as added by the glose in a bantering and lovely way —, the actor will not act the flower-picking of *Sāgarikā*, a maiden craving for love, as he would act that of an ascetic who assigns to the offering of his flowers the hope of an altogether different fruit. So that the actor's genius consists beyond the flower-picking, in embodying the one — maiden or ascetic — who accomplishes the picking gestures. In as long and profuse a way as he considers right.

11. That analysis can in fact be found in the commentary on *nivṛtṭyaṅkura*, p. 168: *bījāder nivṛtṭim yathāṅkuraḥ sūcayati [...]*.

12. As will explicitly be stated by the *Abhinavabhāratī* at the moment of *nātyāyita* 2, p. 167.

So we may say that in the general procedure of the *śārīrasāmānyābhinaya*, the *aṅkura* is the stage when the interpreter has no option but to exert a virtuoso's freedom as well as the responsibility of improvisation. This constitutes a peculiar paradox which is far from being the least seduction of Indian theatre.

The next acting register is metaphorically termed *śākhā*<sup>13</sup>, because it sets in action — two by two and in turn — those twig-limbs that are the head and face, the legs and thighs, and the hands and feet.

Thus does the *śākhā* (coming after the *aṅkura* which had itself formerly supplanted the speech by the body, but whose dedication it was to display the meaning) represent the climax of the use of Gesture, on the verge of dancing, an art wherewith it entertains privileged relationships. As a matter of fact, in spite of the difference of nature between the fields of the *nāṭya* whereto the *abhinaya* belongs and of the *nṛtta*, a great many elements contribute to bringing together the dance and the *śākhā*: the presence of the term *vartanā* in both lexicons, the use both dance and *śākhā* make of the body, and, more especially, of the twig-limbs in a consummate art of Gesture, and, ultimately, their common belonging to the «Graceful Manner», that *kaiśikī vṛtti*<sup>14</sup> indispensable to the lustre of the performance which, in its constitutive elements, only summons whatever is tender, mild, indolent and graceful.

Following the *śākhā*, the *Nāṭyaśāstra* enumerates and defines the two *nāṭyāyitas* in two enigmatic *āryās*<sup>15</sup> which require an intent reading of the glose in order to be understood. In the extensive treatment given by Abhinavagupta to the *nāṭyāyita*, all the argumentation is organized around the etymological sense of the term, that is, around the value conferred on it by its denominative construction. Indeed, the denominatives with *-āya* suffix and middle endings are verbs expressing a state of being, and can be translated by «to behave, to be treated like, to become». One says thus of anyone who behaves like a child, or who is treated as such:

13. NŚ XXII 47, p. 165.

14. Literally «the Manner of the hair». Created by Viṣṇu at the moment of his fight against Madhu and Kaitabha. Cf. NŚ XX 16.

15. NŚ XXII 48-49, pp. 166-167.

*bālakāyate*. In the same way, a *nātyāyita*, if it is not properly speaking a *nātya*, has nevertheless something of a *nātya*, as stated very clearly by the commentary on the second category of *nātyāyita*: *anātyam api nātyam iva*<sup>16</sup>. That means it resembles a *nātya* or passes for one; it is a quasi-*nātya*, or even a pseudo-*nātya*.

Just after the necessary introduction, the *Abhinavabhārati* devotes itself to explaining in what way this general definition is likely to be applied to both cases of *nātyāyita*, those that Abhinavagupta calls respectively *nātyarūpakaniṣṭhanātyāyita*: «which is based on a play» and *kāryāntaraniṣṭhanātyāyita*: «which has its foundation in the initiative of someone else [who is not the poet]». This someone else being the *prayoktr*: the practitioner, the man of the stage who is an actor and/or a director.

The *nātyāyita* of the *nātyarūpakaniṣṭha* category, that we shall, for convenience's sake, call *nātyāyita* 1, is no else than the acting meant to display the singular structure of the play within the play. On the other hand, with the *nātyāyita* of *kāryāntaraniṣṭha* category — or *nātyāyita* 2 — the issue at stake is no longer the necessity to establish a correspondence between the acting and the poet's text, but rather between the acting and a poetical text — the *dhruvā* — expressed through music, and which is the creation of theatre practitioners. The *dhruvā*, whose vocation it is to convey, through the bias of (often animal) metaphors, an indirect description of a specific situation, or the psychological state of a character, double, so to speak, the text of the poet and enrich the performance with added meaning, emotion, and — through the musical addition they represent — with aesthetic pleasure.

Thus it appears that the *nātyāyita*, whatever its category may be, is intended to insert a second-degree performance into the heart of the main one, offering that way to the audience the unparalleled pleasure of Drama brought to a climax: show within show, the *nātyāyita* actually amounts to show upon show. In the case of *nātyāyita* 1, it is a matter of playing a *nātya* enclosed by the poet into the principal one. As for *nātyāyita* 2, it consists in playing one or more *dhruvās*, which have been inserted in the *nātya* proper by

16. Literally: «Although not being a *nātya*, it is like a *nātya*». *ABh.* ad *NŚ* XXII 49, p. 167.

the initiative of the theatre men. Therefore, they are effectively designated by the terms of *nāṭyarūpakaniṣṭhanāṭyāyita* and *kāryāntaraniṣṭhanāṭyāyita*.

As for the last acting register, or *nivṛṭṭyaṅkura*<sup>17</sup>, it requires — in order to be displayed — the simultaneous presence on stage of two actors, one of which is lending an ear to the other's words, unknown to him.

What we learn from the etymological analysis, provided the help of the glose as well as the filling of a few gaps, is that by *nivṛṭṭyaṅkura* we should understand this peculiar acting category which «buds [within the one] at the end of the sentence [of the other]». In other words, the *nivṛṭṭyaṅkura* consists in performing the effect on oneself, the echo within oneself of the other's words, as soon as uttered. Hence it amounts to performing the feelings one is affected by when listening to the other.

In order to justify his commentary on the *nivṛṭṭyaṅkura*, Abhinavagupta quotes a passage taken from Act. II of *Ratnāvalī*. While Sāgarikā is waiting for the answer that the king will give to the Vidūṣaka's question: «Is she a delight to your eyes»? — she asserts herself to be between life and death, and, accordingly, Abhinavagupta shows her hanging on Vatsarāja's lips, performing in turn the feelings surging within herself as she listens to his words. Thus, in the same way as the seed which has disappeared still finds its achievement in the bud, similarly, hardly has the sentence come to an end that it is already budding in the other's acting which completes its potentialities.

In the conclusion to this study, one is left with the impression that the six registers constituting the *śārīrasāmānyābhīnaya* combine into the shape of a sequence, or of a chain wherein each link comes into its place, precisely articulated with the net one. In fact, the first four — *vākyābhīnaya*, *sūcā*, *aṅkura* and *śākhā* — seem to compose between themselves an autonomous whole, constituting the basic core of the *śārīrasāmānyābhīnaya*, and they also seem to be indissociably implemented by the actor within the performance, whatever the text of the drama he has to render may be.

17. *NS* XXII 50, p. 168.



In effect, the *śārīrasāmānyābhinaya* seems, as it progresses, to do nothing else but enrich, and in the case of the *śākhā*, stylize the most simple acting register: the *vākyaābhinaya*. In this way, from the *vākyaābhinaya* crops up the *sūcā* which at once encompasses and transcends it, since it comes as a gestual and silent phase, forestalling this *vākyaābhinaya*. Then comes the *aṅkura* which — through the combined acting of body and emotion — renders in an exhaustive way the latent meanings of the speech just delivered, before leaving ground to the *śākhā*: a language of gesture on the verge of dance, which, in the body, only resorts to the twig-limbs, and which, through its high stylization degree, qualifies itself for the crowning of the actor's performance.

To a certain extent, and in spite of their belonging to the same chain as the other four, the last two elements: the *nātyāyita* — whatever its category — and the *nivṛtṭyaṅkura* are to be put apart, as the actor does not always find himself in a situation which allows him to interpret them. Truly, both depend on the staging conditions of the performing of the drama, according to whether it is the place of occurrence of show within show — through the insertion of a second *nātya* or of some *dhruvā* — or whether it provides the opportunity for the simultaneous presence on stage of two characters, one of which is listening to the other, who is unaware of it.

However, although the elementary core proves quadruple, composed as it is of *vākyaābhinaya*, *sūcā*, *aṅkura* and *śākhā*, the ideal pattern of the *śārīrasāmānyābhinaya* nevertheless coincides, insofar as the performed play favours it, with the full display of the six registers as a whole. An ideal pattern, definitely, but not a utopian one, as Abhinavagupta discloses to us that Subandhu's *Vāsavadattānātyadhāra*<sup>18</sup> offers many an instance of *nātyāyita* and *nivṛtṭyaṅkura*. It is the actor's task then to open more or less widely the great fan of his acting, according to the circumstances.

18. *ABh.* ad *NŚ* XXII 50, p. 168.

Chart 1

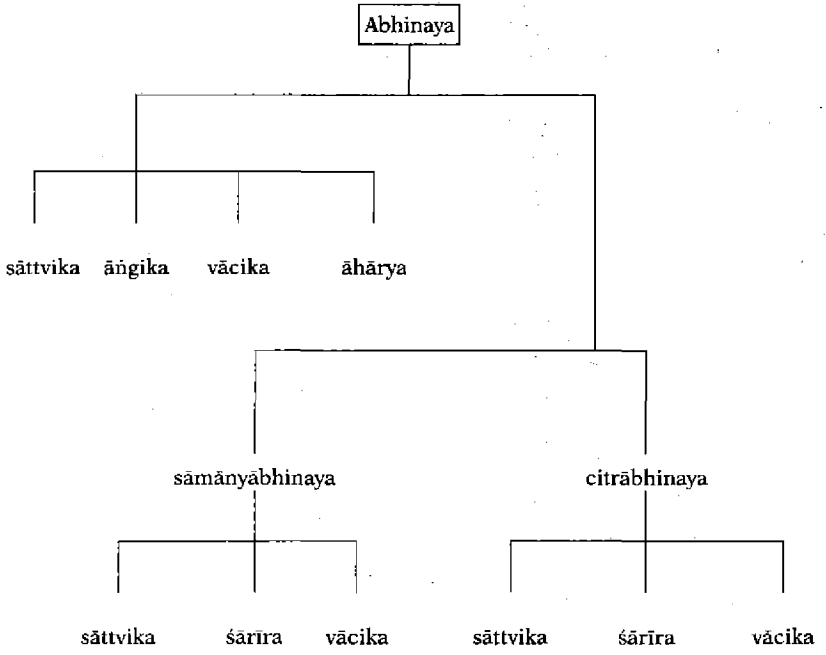
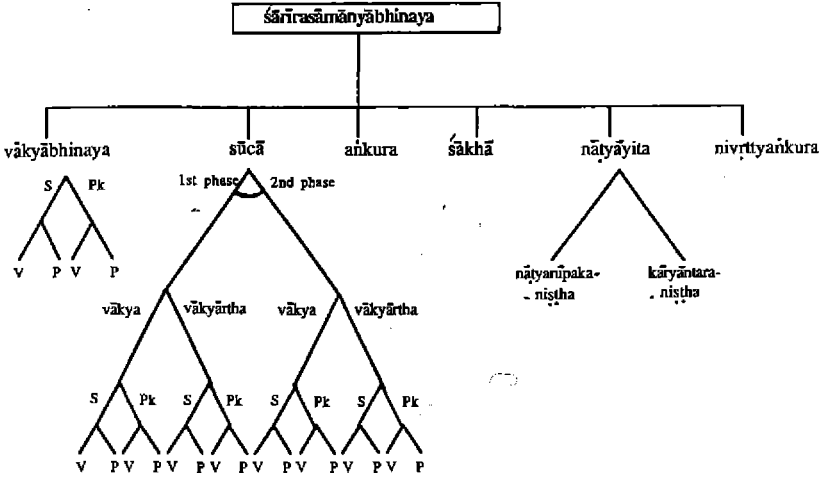


Chart 2



S = Sanskrit

V = Verse

Pk = Prākṛit

P = Prose