CHAPTER I

NĀṬYA — ITS MEANING
Imitation is the basic principle of all forms of artistic expression, says Aristotle. It is an instinct that is implanted in man from childhood, one difference between him and other animals being that he is the most imitative of all living creatures. As such it is not confined to any single nation of the human race; it is universal in its appeal and reveals itself as one of the most primitive of human emotions. Every form of artistic creation—be it music, dance, drama or art—is thus a manifestation of man's irresistible urge to imitate things he perceives through his senses. Human nature being what it is, man exhibits a strong tendency to veer away from reality in his imitation of some action. He delights in improving on it and in presenting a more vivid picture of it so that it may be more appealing to the spectator or to the listener. Imagination is the factor that comes into play here. While reporting an incident we have seen, for instance, consciously or unconsciously we are drawn to conjure up our imagination to vivify the story by adding finishing touches, by exaggerating certain details and sometimes even by altering the sequence of events and inventing new details in order to make it more attractive; consequently, the narrative is bound to be more humorous, more pathetic or more thrilling than the actual incident. Fiction or the art of story-telling, in which the writer gives free play to his imagination, owes its being to this inborn propensity in man to beautify what he reports by retouching or remodelling an original incident. This same artistic imitation, when performed through the media of speech and action, becomes the basic principle of the dramatic art. The difference between the two art forms is that the one depends on narration and the other on representation.

1. Poetics, 1447a, 1448b.
The concept of drama as defined in Sanskrit dramaturgy is fundamentally the same as Aristotle's theory of dramatic art. The Nāṭyaśāstra, the oldest and most comprehensive of the extant works on Sanskrit dramatic theory and practice and ascribed to Bharata, the divine sage and primeval teacher of the theatrical art, defines drama as 'imitation of the behaviour of the people'. For Dhananjaya (10th century A.D.), the author of the Daśarūpa, it is 'the imitating of situations'. There is no substantial difference between the two views, for situations are nothing but the creations of people's conduct at a given time, at a given place, under certain circumstances. Bharata has, in effect, recognized that drama deals with situations of diverse nature. Shakespeare voices the same view when he makes his Hamlet say that the drama's aim is to hold, as it were, a mirror up to nature. In the words of Stanislavsky, the theatre is the art of reflecting life. But Abhinavagupta (hereinafter referred to as Abhinava), the Kashmirian commentator on the Nāṭyaśāstra, vehemently objects to the idea of imitation. He argues that imitation in its strict sense is only an ideal that cannot be realized. Exalted characters like Rāma cannot be imitated by ordinary human beings. Nor does an actor playing Rāma experience on the stage the same feelings and emotions actually experienced by the character. He can only convey to the audience not strictly those feelings and emotions pertaining to the particular character but those of a generic kind. A generic thing cannot pass for something particular. Moreover, the conventional and stylized nature of the drama makes it far removed from faithful imitation of life. The stage is nothing but a stage. The scenic equipment helps us force ourselves to believe that it is the supposed scene of action. And we imagine that the time of action is passing on it though we are fully aware that the events are supposed to have taken place in the distant past. We know that the actor has assumed the likeness of the character by

1. It is difficult to determine the date of this work with any precision. It has been placed by various scholars between the 2nd century B.C. and the 6th century A.D. The 2nd century A.D., however, seems to be a fairly safe date.
2. i. 112 ('lokaśrutīnāśāram nāṭyaṃ')
5. Hamlet, III. ii. 20-23.
means of appropriate costume and make-up, speech and action and that he has concealed his feelings, emotions and moods in his attempt to imitate those of the character. In the portrayal of those feelings, emotions etc. which he has never experienced in reality, he is however guided by his past experiences, imagination and inference. Abhinava therefore declares that drama is an altogether different art form whose aim is to create in the minds of the audience a kind of aesthetic experience through the media of artistic expression of song, music, dance, speech, mime, costume and so on. This view put forward by Abhinava does not however supplant Bharata's definition in any way, but only supplements it, and we may, therefore, describe drama as a form of artistic imitation which is aimed not at reproducing a dull and drab picture of our workaday life, but at generating in the minds of the audience subtle emotional states whereby they would drift off to a higher plane of aesthetic experience.

'Drama' in Greek means 'an action done'. The actions we witness in drama are, of course, only those performed in imitation of similar actions and events done or suffered by people in real life. Modern scholarship, however, has considerably narrowed down the scope of 'drama' which is today applicable only to dramatic literature, and the terms 'drama' and 'play' are now almost interchangeable. A drama or play has been defined as 'a literary work written, by an author or by several authors in collaboration, in a form suitable for stage presentation'. Conversely, the word 'theatre' has come to be used in a much wider sense to include besides the theatre-building, all persons, things and activities connected with the presentation of drama and kindred art forms. 'Theatre' is derived from the Greek 'theatron' which was used in a much restricted sense to mean 'the place of seeing' or the place where the people gathered to witness a dramatic spectacle. But today the theatre embraces within its pale not only the playhouse, but also the performers, the playwright, the director, the technicians and other functionaries, stage-scenery, stage-lighting, costume and make-up and all the rest that go to make the presentation of a play feasible. That is not all. The boundaries of the theatre have

transgressed the limits of drama invading the fields of other forms of artistic spectacle, too, such as opera, ballet and wordless mime.

In Sanskrit the nearest equivalent of 'drama' is 'rupaka', and the term 'nāṭaka' when used in its broader and generic sense may also serve as a synonym. The word 'theatre' in its fullest sense finds its best Sanskrit counterpart in 'nāṭya'¹. The conception of theatre in this wider sense has not been better expressed than in the following verse by Bharata:

'na tajjāṃ na tacchilpaṃ na sā vidyā na sā kalā, nāsāṃ yogo na tatkarma nāṭyeśmin yama dṛṣṭaye'  
(Not a branch of knowledge or a science, or an art or a craft, or a practice or an occupation - if it is not seen in the Nāṭya it is indeed not worthy of the name).

Thus the Nāṭya is a meeting place of all arts and sciences². Equipped with the art of gesticulation, dramatic dialogue and other modes of representation, it reflects upon us the true nature of the world with its diametrically opposite aspects of misery and happiness⁴. It delineates actions of persons belonging to all categories, the higher, the middle and the lower⁵. When we say 'persons' the word applies to inhabitants of all worlds, gods and demons, kings and queens, ministers and Brahmins, divine sages and humble ascetics as well as colourful characters among the humdrum folk⁶. Actors who impersonate these characters on the stage must play the children's game of "Let's pretend", abandoning for the time being their own private personalities and pretending to be other people. The audience in their turn have to pretend as sincerely as the actors who give the performance, so that they may also be surcharged with the feelings and emotions aroused by the clever acting of the actors. These emotional

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¹ 'Nāṭya' is a derivative noun from the root 'nāṭ' (to mime) meaning 'a thing (to be) enacted'. 'Nāṭ' is, in all probability, a variant form of the root 'ṇṛt' (to dance), coined to denote the act of miming after mimicry developed into a specific art form distinct from dance. (Vide Pāṇini, IV. iii. 129). Weber holds that 'nāṭ' is a prakritisation of 'nṛt' (A History of Indian Literature, 3rd edition, p. 197). But this view has been rejected by Mankad (See D.R. Mankad: The Types of Sanskrit Drama, Karachi (1936), pp. 5 ff.).
² NS. i. 116; xix. 143.
³ NS. i. 15; cf. Mālaviyā, i. 4.
⁴ Ibid., i. 119, 142, 144, 146.
⁵ Ibid., i. 118; cf. Poetics, 1448a.
⁶ Ibid., i. 116; xix. 145.
experiences are however different from those of the characters in that they attain a generic and impersonal character unlike the latter which are individual and personal.

The mystery of this theatrical experience is that, whatever the emotions we experience during a performance - be they pleasant or unpleasant - they elevate our world of make-believe to a higher plane where exquisite pleasure is the one and only mental experience, where 'objects which in themselves we view with pain, we delight to contemplate when reproduced with minute fidelity'\(^1\). Weeping in real life is a bitter experience and it is no pleasure for us to see others weep. But when we experience the same emotion in the play-world, it does give us pleasure. In a dramatic performance, the spectacle of the miserable plight of a familiar character whom we dearly love or of a strange character who has, in the course of the play, won our sympathy, may deeply touch our hearts, yet we would, at the same time, be experiencing a kind of joy that is indescribable. We long to see the same scene enacted over and over again though we do not want such an incident to take place in real life. This aesthetic 'relish' we experience as recipients of an artistic production is called in Sanskrit dramatic theory Rasa or sentiment\(^2\), and it is through the realization of the Rasa that we are able to become transported to a higher plane of aesthetic experience far away from the pleasures and miseries of this worldly existence. In this way even those who are detached from the worldly life may escape for the nonce from their own worlds and find solace in the Nātya\(^3\).

Before winding up our discussion, let us take a cursory glance at the story narrated in the Nātyaśāstra of the divine origin of the dramatic art, which sheds a streak of light on the salient points of the Indian concept of drama. Unlike the golden age, which was devoid of all pain, the silver age that followed was one chequered with happiness and sorrow in more or less equal measure. In this benighted age when the people had lost themselves in sensual enjoyment and were suffering on account of their vices like hatred and jealousy, the gods led by Indra once approached the all-father and requested him

1. Poetics, 1448b.
2. Cf. ibid., 1453b f.
3. MS. i. 114.
to create some form of entertainment ('kridaniyaka') pleasing to the ears and eyes alike and worthy of being classed as a Veda accessible to people of all castes unlike the existing four Vedas which were a taboo to the lowest of the four main castes, the Śūdras. Brahmā gave ear to the plea, and, having dismissed the king of gods, fell into a trance to call back to memory the entire four Vedas. He then resolved upon creating a fifth Veda to be named Nāṭya which would epitomize the people's character and conduct, contain the essence of all Śāstras, display all arts and crafts, be a storehouse of history of tradition, conducive to virtue, wealth and fame and serve as a medium of moral instruction. Having conceived in this manner his would-be creation, he extracted from the four Vedas, Ṛg, Śāma, Yajus and Atharva, the four most important elements of drama, viz, speech, song, mimetic art and sentiment respectively and created the Nāṭyaveda. The task of translating this new creation into physical form and transferring it to earth fell upon the sage Bharata and his hundred sons.

This interesting narrative, though looks like a naive attempt aimed at ascribing a divine origin to the profane art, is not without significance, because it outlines in simple terms the objectives and utility of the drama as an art form. The first thing that strikes us here is the universality of the Nāṭyaveda. It is an art form to be enjoyed and appreciated by all people irrespective of caste, rank and position and has been given the status of a Veda which admits of no discrimination against the people of low condition, who have no access to the religious Vedas. The drama is hence a popular art in the true sense, and, since it was created out of the quintessence of the other Vedas, it is no inferior to any of them. Secondly, the necessity to create the art arose in an age when the people's happiness had been marred by suffering resultant of their moral degeneration. Thus one of the chief aims of the Nāṭyaveda is to impart moral education and give salutary advice to the most unsophisticated ones through the pleasant medium of entertainment, and, in this respect, it stands above the four Vedas which neither preach nor teach. Thirdly, the gods emphasized that the new creation should be a feast to the ears and eyes alike. Accordingly, Brahmā carefully selected the beautifying elements of song, mimetic art and sentiment to

1. NŚ. i. 2-25; xxxvi. 1-33.
render this imitation of life more appealing to the spectator. The subject-matter of the drama would include anything and everything both interesting and exciting, incidents relating to virtue, diversion, wealth, serenity, sensual pleasures, humour, war and death to name a few, and it would, therefore, cater to the tastes and interests of all categories of people, without being dreary and monotonous. Sāradātānaya who attributes the creation of the Nātyaveda to God Siva relates how Brahmā, tired of ruling the worlds he himself had created, learnt the Veda from Nandikesvara, the pupil of Siva, and diverted himself by having Bharata and his pupils perform it for him, and how, at a later time, Manu approached Brahmā and had it brought down to earth for his own diversion. Later on, it became a vogue among kings to have dramatic shows performed in their courts as a pleasant distraction from the strain of their heavy royal duties.

To the people at large, the Nātya is something of an efficacious panacea for all sorts of crisis that stare them in the face and in it they can find answers to all their personal problems. The Nātya, says Bharata, grants virtue to those who strive after virtue, pleasure to the pleasure-seekers, intrepidity to the timorous, valour to those who honour heroism, enlightenment to the ignorant, erudition to those who hanker after learning, diversion to the masters, steadfastness to the sorrow-stricken, wealth to those who depend on wealth and joy to the miserable. It bestows upon man happiness, welfare, longevity, fame, and is a means by which he can realize the four ends of life. Thus, while, superficially the Nātya provides amusement for the leisure hour and a welcome relief from the strain of trammelling practical affairs of daily life, its superior aim being to evoke what is called Rasa or 'aesthetic relish' in the minds of the spectators, aesthetically and ideally it serves the purpose of sublimating their minds through a medium which is at once subtle and artistic. In one word, the function of the drama ranges from recreation to revelation, spiritual purification and ennoblement.

1. NŚ. i. 108.
3. NŚ. i. 14 ff.
4. Ibid., 109-111.
5. Ibid., 14 ff.; see also Bh.Pr. p. 221.11 - p. 228.2.