

The Dramatic Structure of Bhasha's *Swapnavasavadattam*

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Abstract

Bhasha (A.D.300) is a remarkable dramatist of Sanskrit literature who introduced various structural devices to drama that were followed by most of Sanskrit dramatists. He contributed about 13 important dramas to Sanskrit literature which are based upon Indian mythologies and epics. He became a major influence on the later playwrights due to his use of Sutradhara (stage director), Vidushaka (fool), and innovations like patakasthana (irony induced astonishment), rasa (sentiment) and aarshprayoga (archaisms) which were unique in their quality and much ahead of his time. The present paper analyses his dramatic style through an analytical study of *Swapnavasavadattam*, one of his most notable plays, with an interest to make writers of other languages know the uniqueness of Bhasha's style.

Keywords: Sutradhara, Vidushaka, Rasa, Aarshprayoga, style, innovations

1. Introduction

Bhasha is a very well known dramatist who has about 13 Sanskrit plays to his credit. These are (1) *Madhyamvyayog* (2) *Pancharatra* (3) *Dootavakya* (4) *Dootaghatokacha* (5) *Karnbhaar* (6) *Urubhanga* (7) *Pratima* (8) *Abhishek* (9) *Baalcharit* (10) *Pratigyayaugandharayan* (11) *Swapnavaasavadattam* (12) *Avimaarak* and (13) *Chaarudattam*. Out of these *Vasavadattam* was discovered in 1909 and the rest in 1911 by Archeological Survey of India. Though their arrival on the literary space was very late in comparison to the other authors of Sanskrit literature, the plays have established Bhasha's reputation among the very revered dramatists of Sanskrit dramatic tradition. The authorship of some of these works is controversial due to unverified claims by various critics; most of them are accepted to be written by Bhasha due to striking similarities among them. The first six are inspired by tales from the *Mahabhaarat*, *Pratima* & *Abhishek* are based upon the *Ramayana*, whereas *Pratigyayaugandhrayana* and *Swapnavasavadattam* emanate from the time of contemporary king Vatsaraja. None of these plays had the name of its writer except *Swapnavasavadattam*, so the only way left for the critics was to draw a similarity to establish their authorship. It is strikingly observed that Bhasha does not follow the dictates of Bharat Muni in *Natyashastra*. It suggests that Bhasha preceded the writing of *Natyashastra* and the works of Kalidasa as no playwright after Kalidasa has violated the rules laid in *Natyashastra*. His *Urubhanga* even allows physical violence in action. According to Keith Berriedale, the time of Bhasha can be well understood to be about A.D. 300 as he writes:

Bhasha was an innovator who shortened the preliminaries which is given as a reason for making him early, because the *Natyashastra* gives the preliminaries in...nor we can say anything regarding his relation to *Natyashastra* which will aid us to date; there is even a tradition that he himself wrote on the theory of drama. Nor can any weight be attached to the view that Bhasha stands nearer Ashvaghosh in technique than Kalidasa; these matters do not permit of precise evaluation in time, and, if we plan

Bhasha about A.D.300, we go as far as the evidence shows. (95)

2. Dramatic Innovations by Bhasha

The innovations done by him are use of Sutradhara (stage director), Vidushaka (fool), patakasthana (irony induced astonishment), rasa (sentiment), and aarshprayoga (archaisms). His art of drama earned a lot of praise from Kalidasa (*Malvikagnimitra*) and Banabhatta who praised the art of Bhasha in his *Harshcharitam*. Both often derived much from the art of Bhasha. Kalidasa praises him in *Malvikagnimitra* in these words:

izfJr" kIkaHkklkSfe Yyddfoiq = knhuakizcU/ kkufrdzE;
 or Zekudos% dkfynkl L; fdz; kukad Fkacgqeku % AA

(How could the works of modern poet Kalidasa be preferred to those of widely famous poets, Bhasha, Saumillaka and others?) (13-14)

Bana Bhatta in *Harshcharitam* writes:
 lw=/kRd`rkjEHkSukZVdScZgqHkwfedS%A
 lirdS;Z"kkysHksHkklksnSodqySfjoAA

(The poet Bhasha gained as much splendour by his plays with introductions spoken by the manager, full of various characters, and furnish with startling episodes, as he would have done by erections of temples...adorned with several stories) (13)(All translation of text mine)

Swapnavasavadattam is the most read and acclaimed among the plays of Bhasha. It can suffice well to draw the speciality of Bhasha's plays and their dramatic technique which inspired many later writers. Here it must be noted that Bhasha is an ancient dramatist whose timeline is not easy to discern, though some critics understood it to be somewhere around 3rd-4th century CE. It clarifies why most of the later playwrights and critics praise and borrow from him in terms of technique. Many of Kalidasa's descriptions and word images are akin to Bhasha. The description of Sakuntala is also influenced by Bhasha greatly. Ganapathy Shastri

explains this influence well by stating, “That the dramatic excellence of Bhasha has been a model for Kalidasa, could well be established from the fact that Sakuntala is mostly adorned with the ideas and expressions peculiar to Bhasha.” (25). That Bhasha was a very talented dramatist is also proved by the fact that most of the later Sanskrit authors like Dandi (6th century AD), Bhamana (8th century AD), Wamana (9th century AD), Rajashekhar (9th century AD) and many others either praise or refer to his works. Shastri while commenting on shringar rasa quotes Sarvananda (1159 AD) who divides it into three categories and refers to *Swapnavasavadattam* as in these lines:

f=foa/k% J xkaj% /kekZFkZdkefHkUu%A r=k|ks
;FkkuUn;UR;kackã.kHkkstue~A
f}arh;% Lons”kekRelkRdrqZeqn;uL;
i|ekOkrhifj.k;ks·FkZJ axkj%A
r`rh;% LoLuokln Rrsr L; SooklnRrkifj.k; % dkeJ axkj % A
(14) (All later quotes belong to this issue)

The whole plot of *Swapnavasavadattam* emerges from the romantic stories of this couple in the poet’s time that had captivated people’s imagination. It is based upon a story of devotion and dedication in conjugal marriage in which nobility and magnanimity and the value of patience win ultimately even in the most unusual circumstances. Udayana (Vatsaraja) the king, after having lost his wife Vasavadatta in a conflagration, is extremely sorrowful. He strongly believes that Vasavadatta might be alive. The play begins in medias res. The king gets visions of Vasavadatta in sleep, which is a natural outcome of his mind. It is in these circumstances the question of strengthening the kingdom arises before Yaugandharayana who is the minister of Udayana. He is anxious to recover all the lost territories of his state from the kingdom of Aaruni for which he plans to offer a prospective marriage alliance to the king of Magadha whose sister Padmavati is of marriageable age. His master should marry her and, as a result, the lost areas would succeed to Udayana’s kingdom as a gift. He makes a plan and asks Queen Vasavadatta, who lives in disguise, to help him in this. Both of them execute the plan easily but Udayana is never free from the thoughts and memories of Vasavadatta. Ultimately all three involved in this alliance are explained by Yaugandhrayana about the whole plot. In the end Udayana’s forces win the battle and peace is established in the end.

A careful analysis of *Swapnavasavadattam* brings to the fore the distinguished qualities of Bhasha as a playwright. The plays of Bhasha establish his very innovative role in establishing the Sanskrit classical tradition in using Sutradhara which begins his plays and ends with a benediction upon a certain king. *Swapnavasavadattam* is a case in point:

ukU|Urs rr% izfo”kfrlw=/kkj%A
(Sutradhara is a person who is stage director. He enters and introduces the play. The characters enter after his introduction.) (34)

The simplicity in plot construction, lucidity in style, realistic description of situations, characterisation and delineation of human life of those times is very life-like. Added to this, the play is free from artificial verse constructions unnecessary to the plot. The hero of the play is of exalted character,

faithful and devoted to his wife. Vasavadatta is a devoted wife who is ready to go to any extent for the sake of her husband as well as the kingdom. In this sense she is very different from the later heroines of Sanskrit plays of Harsha. It presents conjugal love as the most exalted and cherished kind of love. The arranged and contrived marriage of Udayana with Padmavati does not harm the place of Vasavadatta in the heart of Udayana as he confesses to Vidushaka:

i|ekorhcqerke ee ;fi #i”khyek/kq;ZZ%A
oklnRrkc/na u rq rkoUes euks gjfAA

(Padmavati, his new beautiful queen never supersedes in his heart old- beloved Vasavadatta, whose memory he cherishes with the tender affection.) (86)

Udayana never forgets the love of Vasavadatta and it is only due to his deep love he dreams of her in the deep sorrow of having lost her. Similar exalted feeling of love is felt by Vasavadatta as well. Her sacrifice for the state and her husband are of very high stature. Bhasha has induced a peculiar irony of situation in which an ex-wife is entrusted with taking care of a princess who is to wed her own husband. Her self-sacrifice is singular in the whole genre of drama as she shows extra care to Padmavati and when once she falls ill, she is at pains to think that now her desolate husband has lost his source of consolation and says:

vgks vd#.kk% [kYoh“ojk esaA fojgi;ZqRlqdL;k;Ziq=L;
foJeLFkkuHkwrs; efi uke in~ekoR;LoLFk tkrkA
(106)

Throughout her period of disguise, she exercises self restraint and calm resignation and shows no outburst of ill temper to mar the dignity of her character. Vidushaka is another important character used as an element of dramatic technique. He is a constant and trusty companion of the king. He follows Udayana in his love intrigues and induces laughter by his appearance and humorous remarks. He is also a glutton by nature and is desirous of tasting the delicacies. His job is to console the king in dejection and sorrowful mood because of the supposed loss of his queen. On various occasions, when Udayana in deeply moved at his sorrowful state and his eyes are filled with tears, Vidushaka brings water to wash the king’s face. On one occasion he meets Padmavati on the way who asks why he is carrying water. Vidushaka is smart enough to reply that the eyes of the king are filled with tears because the pollen of Kasa flowers has got into his eyes. (Act IV) The significance of Vidushaka is proved on various other occasions as well when he saves the king from embarrassment due to his uneven psychological situation.

Another striking feature is the use of a dramatic device called *Pataakasthana* (dramatic irony, Act II) whose chief use is to induce astonishment in the audience. The situation of Vasavadatta is genuinely ironical. She is very near to her husband but can’t end her disguise for a cherished goal of her minister. She is employed as an attendant to Padmavati and does everything to facilitate the marriage of Padmavati with her husband, that too in disguise. This is an exquisite example of an ironical situation which induces pathos among the audience.

The prevailing Rasa (sentiment) in *Swapnavasavadattam* is no doubt Vipralambhashringara (love-in-separation) which

has various elements of pathos in it which is named as Karun rasa. Arthshringara is used when Bhasha shows why Udayana and Padmavati are to marry for recovering the lost areas from Aaruni. It is subjugated by the chief sentiment of Vipralambhashringara by inducing irony of situation in the character of Vasavadatta. In one of the ironical situations in Act III, Vasavadatta is asked to weave the wedding garland for Udayana and Padmavati because she is of noble birth and adept in this art:

vLekdaHkfl~uh Hk.kfr egkdqyizlwrk fLuX/kk
fuiq. ksfr beka rkor~ dkSrqdekfydk xqEQRok;kZA (68)

3. Conclusion

Thus the innovative genius of Bhasha is a notable contribution for obvious reasons. Bhasha has used many aarshprayogas (archaisms) in the play that defy the rules of Sanskrit grammar. Sentences are sometimes elliptical and it is difficult for the reader unless someone suggests the ellipsis. Such forms of words and expressions became obsolete in later ages. *Swapnavasavadattam* can be divided in sandhis (stages) though it was theorized later by critics. It has all the five stages of a drama; Nyasa (Rescue of Vasavadatta and her induction in the care of Padmavati, Act I), Nyasasamudbheda (Knowledge of Vasavadatta alive through the *tilak* on Padmavati's forehead, Act V), Beejokti (Vatsaraja in deep sorrow, Act V), Beejdarshnam (Vatsaraja gets his flute *Ghosavati* and searches for Vasavadatta, Act VI), and Anuddishtisamhara (Move towards resolution, Act VI). These distinguishing qualities of a playwright in the formative years of Sanskrit drama could make any writer worthy for praise and imitation.

The other plays of Bhasha have other distinguishing features as well. He does not use any open benediction in his plays, rather opens his plays directly with the stage directions. He breaks a very important convention of Sanskrit Drama by killing the hero of his story in the end in *Urubhangam* which was a very unique in those times as people had never seen any tragedy happening on the stage. He even used physical violence in his plays to be shown on the stage. This was very badly taken up by the writer of *Natya Shastra*. The *Urubhangam* is considered as one of the two most tragic plays of the Sanskrit language. In *Urubhangam*, Duryodhana is considered to be an actual hero instead of been considered as a villain according to the great epic of the Mahabharata. He is shown repenting in the play for all the treachery and lies. Many later authors like Kalidasa, Dandin, Vakpati, Bhamana, Wamana, Rajashekhara, Bhojadeva, Abhinavagupta have quoted from Bhasha's works frequently in their works. It establishes the fact that Bhasha is an authority for them, be it poetry, drama or criticism.

4. References

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