

The Need of A Historical Rereading of Urubhanga

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Abstract

Sanskrit drama is often considered as the native Indian drama. Indian elements clearly influenced and shaped this. It often attracted the imagination of almost all including the Westerners. Generally, Euro-centrism rules the world. It is considered often that, what is west is good. But regarding Sanskrit literature, particularly dramas, the picture has been changed. Even western scholars admired the beauty and strength of Sanskrit dramas. Kalidasa and others received worldwide reputation through dramas like Abhinjana Sakunathalam, Malavikagnimithram etc. But certain scholars are always sidelined. This study aims to grab the attention of scholars to one such genius who suffered literary history – Bhasa and one of his master pieces – Urubhanga.

Keywords

Bhasa, Urubhanga, Sanskrit, Duryodhana, theatre

Introduction

Bhasa is often introduced as a dramatist before Kalidasa. This is like describing Coleridge as a contemporary of William Wordsworth. In fact, Coleridge is a greater artist than Wordsworth. Just like that Bhasa is greater than almost all other Sanskrit writers. Then, without the film, ‘Panitheerathaveedu’ in Malayalam and the song beginning with Kannuneerthulliye.. Bhasa would not have become a household name. That is, what I am going to substantiate is that Bhasa needs more attention and care. In fact, he can be regarded as the architect of Sanskrit drama.

Sanskrit Drama

Sanskrit drama is a combination of music, dialogue, gesticulation and imitation. The aphorism ‘Natakantam Kavithvam’ shows the importance given to dramatic form. India has a rich heritage of Sanskrit theatre. The Natyasastra of Bharata (2 c. BC) is the earliest known and the most authoritative work on dramaturgy. Theatre was popular even earlier. The Brahmanical and Buddhist literature and the grammatical works of

Panini and Patanjali which are quite earlier than the Natyasastra refer to dramatic performances. Like everything Indian, the origin of Indian drama is steeped in mystery, veiled in obscurity and darkness; and like most Indian things the origin is shown to be religious¹. Bharata in his Natyasastra mentions a Vedic origin of Sanskrit drama. Indra, accompanied by gods called on Brahma, the creator and requested him to make an entertainment accessible to all classes of society including the Sudras, as the later were prevented from listening to the vedas'. Brahma accepted the request and composed the fifth Veda taking dialouge from Rigveda music from Samaveda, the art of representation and imitation from Yajurveda and the sentiments from Atharvaveda and handed it over to Indra who pleaded inability of Devas to enact the play. The creator then revealed the Natyaveda to Bharata who with his hundred sons brought it to the earth. Kalidasa supports this version'. Another version regarding the origin of drama furnished by the Abhinayadarpana of Nandikesvara is that Bharata studied Natyasastra from Brahma and performed before Lord Shiva with the help of gandharvas and apsaras. Some scholars have tried to prove that Indian dramas

were influenced by Greek Drama². Historians and many scholars of Indian drama trace a religious and to some extent a secular origin of Sanskrit drama³.

Bhasa's Dramas

The 13 dramas ascribed to Bhasa are the earliest dramas available in Sanskrit. The thirteen plays ascribed to him are – Madhyamavyayoga, Pancharatram, Dutavakyam, Dutaghatotkacham, Karnabharam, Urubhangam, Balacaritam, Pratima, Abhisheka, Daridracarudattam, Svapnavasavadattam, Pratijnayaughandharayanam and Avimarakam. But there are a lot of issues relating to the authorship of these dramas, because of the absence of more evidences regarding him. The discovery and publication of these thirteen plays in the Trivandrum Sanskrit series will go down to posterity as the most epoch-making landmark in the history of Sanskrit drama. Mm. T. Ganapati Shastri in his tour for search of manuscripts found these⁴. But there are evidences of Bhasa in Indian literature even before these discoveries. Such poets and critics who refers to Bhasa or his works include Kalidasa and Bhoja of Malwa, Vamana and Abhinavagupta of Kashmir, Bana and Vakpatiraja of Kanauj, Somaprabhasuri of Anhilwad, Sodhdhala of

Ancient Konkana, Ilankovadikal, the Tamil poet etc⁵. Kalidasa refers to him as a famous and popular dramatist in the prologue of his drama Malavikagnimitram – “Shall we neglect the works of such illustrious authors as Bhasa, Saumilla and Kaviputra”. Of these Bhasa’s work alone have survived today, the works of the other two having slipped from the terra firma of history to the loose sands of speculation. This provides a true measure of the greatness of Bhasa’s art⁶. Here, his work, Urubhanga is going to be analysed.

Urubhanga

Urubhanga is an important Sanskrit play in many respects. It is based on Mahabharata, the Indian epic. Generally, Sanskrit plays are remarkable for its absence of tragic plays. But Urubhanga is an exception. Aristotle defined tragedy as “an imitation of an action that is serious, complete and of a certain magnitude; in language, embellished with each kind of artistic ornament, the several kinds being found in separate parts of the play; in the form of action not of narrative; through pity and fear effecting the proper purgation of these emotions”⁷. Judged by this yardstick, Urubhanga is a perfect tragedy. According to Aristotle, in a tragedy all incidents should be relevant to the tragic movement of the action. This is known as

the Unity of Action. Tragedy tries as far as possible to confine itself to a single day, for the course of its action (Unity of Time). Again, tragic hero must be one who towers head and shoulders above his contemporaries. He must be generally virtuous. A wicked man’s fall cannot create pity. So the hero must not be an embodiment of virtues. There must be one tragic flaw and his downfall must come as a result of his flaw.. Urubhanga confines itself to a single day and single action. The Shakespearean dictum ‘Character is destiny’ is applicable here as well. Judged by these canons, we can boldly say that Urubhanga is cast in the mould of the classical tragedy.

Natyasastra is considered as the most authentic work on Indian drama. But a kind of slight aversion from Natyasastra can be seen in Bhasa’s plays particularly in Urubhanga. Natyasastra prohibits the depiction of death in stage whereas in Urubhanga, the hero Duryodhana dies in the stage.

Mahabharata had made tremendous influence on Indian literature and Duryodhana, the haughty, arrogant Duryodhana- does not he confess at one point that he realizes what is dharma but has no inclination for it, that he knows what is adharma and has terrible weakness

for it and ‘O Lord you sitting in my heart direct and I only do your bidding’? This coupled with his piteous wail as he crosses the river of blood on his son’s dead body, his desperate attempt to hide in Vyasa Sarovara as Bhima calls him to battle make us feel pity for this character who was indeed a plaything of destiny or fate⁸. Urubhanga is also a depiction of Duryodhana but in a different style. Urubhanga, the title refers to the smashing of thighs of Duryodhana in Mahabharat by Bhima and the subsequent tragic death of the former⁹.

The play begins with a prelude in which three soldiers come to stage as instructed by the stage manager and they start with the description of the great field of Kurukshetra after the main battle is over, and when the duel between Bhima and Duryodhana is about to begin. The plain of Kurukshetra is shown strewn with corpses of kings, soldiers, horses and elephants slain in battle. Kurukshetra called the hermitage of battle, the home of hostility, the touchstone of valour, the abode of pride and glory, a burnt sacrifice of human lives, the prince’s bridge to Heaven.

Another describes the horrible sight of vultures, crows and other birds feasting on the meat of the dead king,

soldiers and jackals pulling out from the chariot the body of a dead warrior. Blood is flowing like rivers; horses are still drawing the chariot from which both the warrior and charioteer have fallen. The gem set-ornaments and the shining weapons of the warriors are scattered on the ground glittering in the evening sunlight. Then the narrator further describes how Bhima and Duryodhana engage in a duel with their maces causing a terrific sound due to the clash of the maces, in the presence of Vyas, Balarama, Krishna, Yudhishtir, Vidur and Arjuna. Remembering the insult of dragging Draupadi by her hair Bhima is furious and Duryodhana is terribly angry due to the killing of his hundred brothers by Bhima. Duryodhana seemed to be more skillful than Bhim who had been injured by Duryodhana in duel. Just then Krishna gives a hint to Bhima by striking his own thigh with his hand, Bhima understands the hint and then Bhimasen hits Duryodhana’s thighs with his mace called Chitrangada, crushing the thighbone. Balarama become furious at this foul act of Bhima.

Duryodhana now enters dragging his body with broken thighs by the strength of arms and crawling on the ground like Vasuki, the serpent king.

Balarama says the he will kill pandavas but Duryodhana with due respect, begs Balrama to let the Pandavas live for offering libations to the departed ones of the Kuru race. Just then Dhritarashtra, Gandhari led by Durjaya, the youngest son of Duryodhana followed by his wives arrive on the scene. Now begins the most touching scene of the drama. The bold Duryodhana feels miserable when he finds his wives weeping and says that only now he feels the pain caused by the blow of mace because his ladies have come to the battlefield exposing their hair. Gandhari, a strong woman also sheds tears at the thought of Duryodhana's impending death. Duryodhana feels sorry for not being able to prostrate at his father's feet, he does not feel the pain of his crushed thighs as much as the pain that the blow of the mace deprived him the pleasure to prostrate at his father's feet. Duryodhana's misery overflows as he sees his child Durjaya. When Durjaya who tries to come to sit on the lap of his father in all innocence, Duryodhana has to prevent him, and it is then he feels the bitterest grief of his life. Duryodhana asks his father, mother and his wives to control their grief. Asvatthama suddenly appears in the mournful atmosphere of the battlefield with a bow in his hand, the twang of which

generates panic. He tells Duryodhana that he will kill all Pandavas along with their guide Krishna and bring honour to him. Here Duryodhana tells Asvatthama to lay down his bow since no useful purpose will be served when all of his brothers, his friend Karna and many powerful kings who fought on his side are lost and even the great grandfather has fallen. Asvatthama, however, tells Duryodhana that he cannot put up with the wrong Bhima Sen has done to him, and pledges that he will begin the war in the night, causing all the Pandavas to burn to death. Baladev tells Duryodhana that nobody can stop Asvatthama when he has once decided to destroy the Pandavas. In a happy mood Duryodhana begins to sink. Bhasa has described here the visions and feelings of a dying hero as they are described in the Upanishads and in Puranas. The dramatist has succeeded to draw sympathy and admiration of the audience and the readers for Duryodhana, though some of his weaknesses are also brought about. In the end Balarama, a witness to all that has happened recites the Bharat Vakya. The epilogue of the play expresses that war cannot create anything good and that it destroys civilisation. The chorus sings with the following words of Bharata, a great Indian saint of ancient

times: “From our world, let all unhappiness be removed. And let there be the advent of peace as the benign sun reaches the earth, and let the whole world smile like a billowy ocean.” And the curtain falls.

The story starts with the depiction of war by three warriors and refers to the fight between Bhima and Duryodhana. On the instance of Krishna, Bhima smashes Duryodhana in his thighs. Duryodhana is presented as a hero and all characters are weeping for him. But he was presented as a character of patience and he pacifies all which gives glory to his character. The dialogue between Durjaya and Duryodhana was of immense importance not only because of its immense sentimental approach but also of its creation of Duryodhana as a man of eternal paternal love and other inner traits. He even says his son to respect Pandavas and Kunti, Draupadi etc. It shows a complete shift in his character and forced Balarama to say ‘Alas! Here is fierce hostility converted into remorse’. When Asvathaman enters and speaks about killing Pandavas, he pacifies him and says the futility of his enmity and life in the midst of the deaths of his beloved brothers and Karna in front of him¹⁰. The play is not the actual version of Mahabharata story. It

is to an extent Bhasa’s Duryodhana. He created him in such a manner that he was the real hero in Mahabharat, a noble emperor, a good son, husband and father. The greatness of his fall is beautifully summarized by the dramatist when he makes his Dhritharashtra say that the golden pillar, which once supported the world, is reduced to the plight of a broken door bolt, lying flat on the ground¹¹.

Thus the merit of Urubhanga as a drama proper is undisputable and a historical, literary and critical rereading on the part of scholars and laymen is the need of the hour. In other words, it is true that Bhasa failed to get the deserved popularity or rather he suffered literary history.

Conclusion

Urubhanga written by Bhasa is an undisputed classic in the realm of Sanskrit dramas. It can be considered as an opposition to the existing norms which ruled Sanskrit literature. He portrayed a perfect tragedy which was unparalleled in Indian theatre then. The work has certain historical validity as well. Though Bhasa’s age was not finalized, it is believed that Bhasa had written his Urubhanga even before the composition of Mahabharata in its present form. In that work, he portrayed Duryodhana as a man of heroic qualities, as a hero. This itself makes the historical

rereading of this Drama inevitable. The need of the hour is to find out history from the quasi historical work or epic – Mahabharata. Who was the real King? Whether Pandavas, the heroes, true heroes? Or they changed the course of the work, just because they are the victors. Sometimes, history became the story of victorious people rather than that of the losers. So a rereading is essential.

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