ISSN (Online): 2455-3662
EPRA International Journal of Multidisciplinary Research (IJMR) - Peer Reviewed Journal
Volume: 10| Issue: 12| December 2024|| Journal DOI: 10.36713/epra2013 || SJIF Impact Factor 2024: 8.402 || ISI Value: 1.188

BEYOND CONVENTION: BHASA'S REVOLUTIONARY IMPACT ON SANSKRIT THEATRE

N R Gopal
Associate Professor, Dept. of English, CUHP, Dharamshala

ABSTRACT

This paper is a probe into the plays of Bhasa and their impact over the eons. Bhasa was a pioneering figure in the world of Sanskrit theatre from whom we have received a treasured handful of dramatic works. Peeking into any one of these plays gives us the thrill of encountering a mind busy pushing the art forward. For that reason, Bhasa and his plays deserve a not-too-brief study in any comprehensive history of theatre in the Indian subcontinent. The study shows how his combination of political subjects with personal ones formed a new kind of Sanskrit drama that later playwrights, such as Kalidasa, adopted. It also looks at the modern, sometimes surreal, contemporary world of Bhasa's theatrical reimaginings. His fundamental themes – pulse, love, and a woman's place in the world – speak directly to non-pecuniary concerns of modern audiences and make Bhasa a viable candidate for the next directorial hall of fame. The study finds that Bhasa's contributions transformed Sanskrit theatre and built a bridge from classical drama to modern traditions that in many respects is a continuity with his work.

KEYWORDS: *Bhasa, Sanskrit Drama, Classical Indian Theatre, Dramatic Innovation, "Svapnavasavadattam", Theatrical Adaptation, Dramatic Conventions, Indian Literature, Performance Studies, Classical Dramaturgy*

INTRODUCTION

One of the most authoritative influences in classical Sanskrit literature, Bhasa has profoundly formed and fashioned Indian theatre. While exact dates are debatable, he is said to have born in third Century AD, making him one of the oldest known figures in Indian drama and theatre before the better-known Kalidasa(Britannica). Bhasa's works and their rediscovery in the early 20th century completely transformed our understanding of theatrical and dramatic form in ancient India. This study probes Bhasa's ground-breaking influence on the creation and development of Sanskrit drama. His plays that exist today are closely analyzed and their dramatic and thematic innovations evaluated for their enduring influence on the tradition of Indian drama, culminating in contemporary theatrical practices.

The Vedic rituals and folk traditions served as the womb from which Sanskrit drama emerged. The dramatic forms of these early performances included not just the dialogic hymns (*samvada suktas*) of the Rigveda but also the more strictly "performative" elements of the Yajurveda, which served as a sort of script for the Vedic rituals. From them, dance and music were incorporated into the formations of drama that ultimately would evolve into the classical Sanskrit theatre that we recognize today. Dramatic principles were gradually formalized during the time of Bhasa, and they culminated in Bharata's *Natyashastra*. This text laid down the rules and conventions of Sanskrit drama, most of which were adapted and transformed by Bhasa in his works.

Bhasa's Works

The Bhasa corpus contains thirteen plays, found in Kerala in 1912 by Ganapati Sastri. "Svapnavasavadattam" (The Vision of Vasavadatta) is a masterful example of Bhasa's way with a narrative. It is complex but unknots itself with the ease of a political thriller, replete with personal emotion and well-placed titbits of information that telescope time and space. "Pratima" and "Abhisheka" are versions of scenes from the Ramayana, which Bhasa shapes into his own drama—makes them dramatically viable as well as artistically justifiable. ""Urubhanga" " and "Karnabhara" are unique takes on the Mahabharata.

"Svapnavasavadattam" (The Vision of Vasavadatta)

Bhasa's "Svapnavasavadattam" is a masterwork of political drama mixed with romance. This play follows King Udayana of Vatsa as he swings between love and essential statecraft and follows his heart and his mind in trying to work out a solution to never-ending and never-resolved dilemmas. "The main feature of the play is the delicacy with which the feelings of Vasavadatta are indicated"(Woolner and Sarup 38).

The story centers on Udayana, who believes that a palace fire has taken the life of his beloved queen, Vasavadatta. However, she lives and is in disguise while Udayana considers marrying another woman, Padmavati, for the sake of a political alliance. A key dramatic moment is when Udayana has a dream in which he envisions Vasavadatta. This moment reveals Udayana's inner turmoil and serves to push the plot along. Padmavati enters Udayana's life, and though she has started to admire his noble character, she is still uncertain about marrying a man who is still in love with his dead wife. Udayana does have warmth for Padmavati, but he mostly appears to be emotionally stuck in the past with Vasavadatta. In disguise, Vasavadatta comes to find herself close to Udayana's court. A batch of methodically wrought dramatic incidents spills out all of the clues necessary to interpret the story as it has unfolded in the court of Udayana.

ISSN (Online): 2455-3662
EPRA International Journal of Multidisciplinary Research (IJMR) - Peer Reviewed Journal
Volume: 10| Issue: 12| December 2024|| Journal DOI: 10.36713/epra2013 || SJIF Impact Factor 2024: 8.402 || ISI Value: 1.188

Udayana is very happy to discover that Vasavadatta is alive. Padmavati, understanding the profound love between Udayana and Vasavadatta, accepts, with great dignity, her role in this new arrangement or constellation of characters. The play concludes with a restoration of harmony between all the characters, who, at the end of the play, show great respect and affection for one another.

"Svapnavasavadattam", stands out not just for its innovation and artistic merit but for its very classic elegance. These qualities take the play beyond the realm of ordinary narrative and thrust it into the space of something much more profound—that is, emotional depth, psychological complexity, and some very engaging and serious political intrigue.

The title of the play, "Svapnavasavadattam", highlights the centrality of dreams (*svapna*) in the work. Bhasa employs dream sequences to delve into the characters' not-so-obvious emotions, placing us securely in their psychologies—especially that of Udayana, whose visions of Vasavadatta we understand as metaphorical for unchanneled emotions and suppressed desires. These sequences provide a glimpse of the king's unstable condition, letting the audience feel the emotion he is experiencing. This technique gives Bhasa the freedom to examine more profound and thoughtful ideas of remembrance and desire, making the play not just a story of what happens next but also a way to understand the characters on a more intimate level.

Bhasa creates a sophisticated multi-layered narrative told through the complementary interplay of three parallel plots.

The Political Plot: Anchoring the political narrative is the marriage of Udayana and Padmavati, masterminded by the cunning Yaugandharayana. This plot sets the stakes very high.

The Romantic Plot: Undergirding this political plot is the hidden presence of Udayana's first love, Vasavadatta, who must remain hidden until the right moment for maximum impact. This is a plot that wrings every drop of emotional tension out of its setup.

These two plots work together flawlessly—it is impossible to have one without the other. Indeed, they appear to have been designed to complement one another, almost as if they are plotting together. Each is essential to the overall resolution and each gets its time in the spotlight without the other being diminished.

With skilful artistry, Bhasa weaves together the political and the personal, the public and the private, in a nearly perfect structure that reflects the intricate and sometimes ambiguous interplay between them. The "death" of Vasavadatta is necessary for political reasons, demonstrating how royal personages must often make hard choices for the sake of statecraft and sacrifice what most noble and common folk would take as their private right. When Udayana marries again, it is a decision not only of the heart but a way to bind a potentially rebellious border-province to his alliance and strengthen the political situation in his kingdom.

In Bhasa's plays, the characters assume three-dimensional shapes that reel us into their world and make us believe in them. At the same time, their dimensions are not flat; they harbour depth, internal conflicts, and surface tensions that we find relatable:

Vasavadatta: Her choice to act as if she is dead brings home her inner struggle between wanting to be happy and being loyal to her royal husband and kingdom. You can see her strength, grace, and resilience throughout the play.

Udayana: He is the epitome of the conflicted hero in love. He loves Vasavadatta but, in the name of political necessity, must give her up. His grief and longing and eventual acceptance of Padmavati reveal quite the emotional range for a king.

Padmavati: As a new bride entering a delicate situation, Padmavati's deep character emerges through her compassion and understanding.

With these layered characterizations, Bhasa probes eternal themes of love, sacrifice, and the weight of leadership.

"Svapnavasavadattam" is a timeless masterpiece of ancient Indian theatre. It is made so by its brilliant author, Bhasa, who gave it multiple resonances. He created it with dream sequences, parallel plotting, and an intricate blend of personal and political narratives. These techniques used by Bhasa guarantee that this play keeps being honoured in our time as an ancient classic, capable of speaking to us on many different levels. It also contains deep psychological dimensions, arising from its presentation of characters with profound internal conflicts.

"Urubhanga" (The Broken Thigh)

"Urubhanga" demonstrates Bhasa's willingness to challenge dramatic conventions through its unique interpretation of the Mahabharata. Revolutionary in its scope, "Urubhanga" (The Broken Thigh), a play by Bhasa—one of the earliest known dramatists from ancient India—reinterprets the character of Duryodhana from the epic Mahabharata. While traditional tellings of the story often present Duryodhana as a two-dimensional villain and Bhima, his adversary, as a heroic figure, Bhasa here gives us a much more complex rendition. He portrays Bhima as somewhat less than heroic, because in the moment of confrontation proceeding loss and death, Bhima strikes Duryodhana in a way that violates the ethical codes governing proper conduct during wartime—codes known in the ancient Indian context as dharma. In the midst of his agony, Duryodhana contemplates the life he has lived—an existence that constantly wavers between moments of proud refulgence, when he feels he has truly accomplished something, and deep moments of remorse, when he has to face, in his own mind's eye, the devastation that he has wrought in the world around him because of his ambition and his enmity with the Pandavas. At these junctures, we see a monarch compelled by a sense of

ISSN (Online): 2455-3662
EPRA International Journal of Multidisciplinary Research (IJMR) - Peer Reviewed Journal
Volume: 10| Issue: 12| December 2024|| Journal DOI: 10.36713/epra2013 || SJIF Impact Factor 2024: 8.402 || ISI Value: 1.188

obligation to his realm but also one who is possibly too proud and too resentful to see the situation clearly, a flawed but somewhat admirable character.

A decision not typical of classical Sanskrit drama is to present violence directly on stage. This is a hallmark of Bhasa's plays. Classical Sanskrit drama traditionally avoided showing brutality explicitly and required the audience to use its collective imagination to fill in the details of horrid happenings. But Bhasa presents not only the broken body of Duryodhana in agonized contortions but also the very real horrors of war that make the ridiculous consequences of violence painfully clear. And if that were not enough of a departure from convention, Bhasa's Duryodhana also meditates on the meaning of his predicament, using the dire straits of his situation as an internal monologue that reveals the kind of psychological depth rarely seen in traditional stage characters.

In presenting his protagonist's flaws, Bhasa does not hold back. Duryodhana recognizes and admits to the part he has played in ramping up the war. Yet, with all this, he is nonetheless granted a sympathetic shade that allows for a contemplation of his character and an understanding of his motivations. Why did he do what he did? What led him to make the choices for which he so begrudgingly shows acceptance? The arrival of Duryodhana's parents, Dhritarashtra and Gandhari, gives the piece another level of shading. We learn from their mourning and their words that Duryodhana was very much also a son, a victim of fate, and —as they insist— someone whose life had infinite value. Bhima's dishonourable act stains his victory and makes us rethink the simple good-versus-evil duality. The play's flashbacks not only add richness and complexity to the present plot—they also allow the audience to witness moments from the past that illuminate Duryodhana's character, motivations, and as-yet-revealed vulnerabilities. Bhasa's innovative structure means that not only do we pity Duryodhana, but we also see the tragic inevitability of the course that has been set for both him and the Pandavas. The play expresses "compassionate heroism"(Gerow 412).

"Urubhanga" goes beyond the traditional limits of storytelling. It examines moral murkiness, and puts the audience in the position of having to think about just what is right and wrong. It is a powerful statement against war, even as it celebrates the might and power of the fallen warrior. It is bold, and makes no apologies, and if "heroes" are traditionally accorded all the virtues, Bhasa's portrayal makes clear that Duryodhana is far from unheroic, even if he is unvigilant. There is a reason this work has had such a strong afterlife. The question it asks at its heart—What is conflict, and why does it happen?—is something with which every generation of humans must grapple.

"Urubhanga" and "Svapnavasavadattam" are both classic dramatic masterpieces of Bhasa. At the same time, both plays—though remarkably different in their subject matter—make bold, innovative, and unmistakable artistic statements that showcase Bhasa's mastery of complex character psychology, layered narrative structures, and a profound exploration of the tension between duty and personal desire. These features alone would be sufficient to elevate both "Urubhanga" and "Svapnavasavadattam" to the pantheon of great works of art. Bhasa's works show his remarkable knack for taking history and mythology and morphing them into the very sophisticated forms of dramatic structure that would influence the making of such works in this ancient tongue for many centuries after his death.

Stylistic Features

Bhasa's dramatic style is bold and innovative. He redefined classical Sanskrit drama and took it in a new direction. He is known for presenting violence directly on stage, unlike the usual practice of avoiding brutality. For instance, in "Urubhanga" , one of the most compelling dramatizations of a classical story, we see Bhima's unethical strike on Duryodhana's thighs. Bhasa doesn't skirt around it; he renders it in an agonizing manner that produces a strong hit against the emotional wall of the audience. Can you ask any hard questions about the morality of a war when you also leave any whiff of brutality out of it?

Another key aspect of Bhasa's style is dramatic irony and foreshadowing, which, when used together, deepen the narrative and add complexity to the events that unfold. When these two elements are present, the audience knows something that is not yet known to the characters onstage. In "Svapnavasavadattam", the audience knows that Vasavadatta is alive while Udayana believes her to be dead. The audience is privy to the kind of information that would, in most situations, be shared between characters. And when characters make decisions based on the assumptions they've made, you, the audience, are put in a position to judge their foolishness, especially since you're privy to the dramatic irony.

Bhasa shows a deft hand in the use of languages, blending Sanskrit and Prakrit seamlessly in his dialogues to reflect the different social and emotional contexts of his characters. The characters of noble birth speak in Sanskrit, adding an air of authority to their words. Those of common or comedic ilk express themselves in Prakrit, the vernacular tongue of the people. This use of dual language allows for a richer emotional palette in a character's portrayal and makes for an interesting speech texture in the dialogue.

Additionally, Bhasa's inventive employment of the story director (sutradhara) amplifies narrative momentum and audience interaction. Normally charged with the humble duty of introducing the play, the sutradhara in Bhasa's works tends to take on a relatively more vibrant role, ushering the spectators through plot development both with and without the aid of other characters. "Svapnavasavadattam", for instance, possesses a more complex narrative than do some other plays within Bhasa's corpus. Throughout this play, the sutradhara guarantees that sweet clarity with which one ought to enjoy a piece of narrative art while also ensuring that the sweet consistency of a play's emotional contours is maintained.

ISSN (Online): 2455-3662
EPRA International Journal of Multidisciplinary Research (IJMR) - Peer Reviewed Journal
Volume: 10| Issue: 12| December 2024|| Journal DOI: 10.36713/epra2013 || SJIF Impact Factor 2024: 8.402 || ISI Value: 1.188

These stylized features—direct violence, dramatic irony, duality of language, and the inventive use of the sutradhara—make for emotionally vibrant, intellectually provocative, and structurally innovative dramas. They ensure resonance beyond the superficial level of 'theatre,' striking deep into the emotional chords of the audience, and allowing for not only experience but also intellectual engagement.

The playwright Bhasa shows remarkable linguistic skill not only in the use of a single language but also in the blending of two that are meant to exist side by side. His use of the language of the elite, Sanskrit, and Prakrit, the vernacular, produces a range of speech that reflects the social and emotional contexts of a character that, in plain terms, means he gives his characters some damn good lines. But it's not just about using the right words for the right kind of character at the right moment; it's also about a kind of language that feels deeply authentic — as if speech acts in the past really constituted speech acts.

Moreover, Bhasa's inventive use of the stage manager to enhance narrative flow and audience engagement is hard to rival. The stage manager, in Bhasa's works, is often a more engaged character who walks the audience through what is arguably a more engaging, more circular narrative. Clarity is achieved not through obvious exposition but through the stage manager's direction, at times almost in a friendly manner, which is especially necessary in stories as elaborate as the one found in the play "Svapnavasavadattam".

Bhasa's dramas elicit strong emotions and demand intellectual engagement. Their structural ingenuity is compelling. These are the basic features of Bhasa's style. But they serve to characterize his work as something between "traditional" and "avant-garde." They suggest that Bhasa is very much at home when writing in a "classical" language for a "classical" genre yet also very comfortable innovating with both form and content.

Key Themes in Bhasa's Dramas

The works of Bhasa delve into eternal themes and timeless questions. They treat the common human emotions we all experience with the kind of depth and nuance that gives literature its lasting value. But unlike many great works of literature that stick largely to telling the story of some great figure of the past, Bhasa's plays ask us to ponder the larger, philosophical, and ethical issues that even today concern us when we experience the emotions they portray.

Love is not simply a romantic notion in the plays of Bhasa; it is deeply aligned with the themes of duty, sacrifice, and political necessity. When he places love at the centre of his dramas, he uses it as an entry point to probe much larger social and personal dilemmas. In "Svapnavasavadattam", the love between Udayana and Vasavadatta is portrayed with such tenderness that one almost forgets the context of the play, which has to do with statecraft and the demands of the ruler's duty. Vasavadatta's decision to feign her death and live apart from Udayana serves as the play's denouement, and it also serves as a fine example of the selflessness and other-directedness required of individuals who put the state first and their own personal happiness last. In Bhasa's view, relationships are arenas where personal dreams must frequently defer to social responsibilities—an ideal most writers would rather keep submerged lest it spoil the tender illusions on which love, or the pursuit of it, is founded. Yet in Bhasa's world, as in ours, love can't be tender without also being reliable, courageous, and selfless—not only in passion's private domain but also in the public space of personal duty and responsibility.

Karna, the protagonist in Bhasa's drama "Karnabhara"(The Burden of Karna) has an identity imposed on him by forces beyond his control, including the curses he has earned and the revelation of his true lineage. No amount of valor or loyalty can save him from the life that fate has laid out for him. Yet, Bhasa does not cast him as a sad puppet with no strings to pull but rather as a figure of agency who struggles valiantly (and vainly) to assert his identity and claim the life he has earned. This representation makes Karna's tragic downfall even more heartrending. Fate is a weighty force in this text, and as much as we might like to think, agency is simply an illusory kind of freedom. "Karnabhara is certainly a very noble piece where greatness of Karna reaches the heights of sublimity and grandeur"(Devadhar 37).

In the same way, Duryodhana's musings on his loss in "Urubhanga" show him trying to reconcile his ambitions with the obviousness of his downfall, ordained as it was by divine forces and the "unmoral" breaching of war ethics. Fate versus free will is a key theme in Bhasa's works, and in the next four scenes of "Urubhanga" , he splits Duryodhana's reflection on human versus divine agency across many characters. The reason is not just to deepen the plot but to work out that theme in a complex, morally rich way, one wherein characters are both authors of their actions and subjects of an irresistible destiny. "Both in verse and prose the author proves himself as the master of Kavya-style"(Devadhar 37).

Not only do these themes mark Bhasa's storytelling as insightful and deep, but they also show him engaging with some big philosophical questions and entertaining us with the answers. They make him secure his legacy as a master of classical Sanskrit drama.

CONCLUSION

The Indian theatrical tradition first struck a path of evolution with the appearance of Bhasa. His influence is such that we can consider him a pivotal figure in the very early development of Indian drama. When it comes to the complexity of character, the emotional depth often expressed in the dialogue, and the exploration of certain themes, Bhasa achieves a level that is not only a road sign to later dramatists but also not easily surpassed. His works seem to be more than just passages replete with a vocabulary that demands a certain poetic skill. And while his works likely build on certain elements of poetic drama, they do appear as structural innovations from a traditional point of view.

ISSN (Online): 2455-3662
EPRA International Journal of Multidisciplinary Research (IJMR) - Peer Reviewed Journal
Volume: 10| Issue: 12| December 2024|| Journal DOI: 10.36713/epra2013 || SJIF Impact Factor 2024: 8.402 || ISI Value: 1.188

Kalidasa, often seen as the most accomplished Sanskrit playwright, certainly draws from Bhasa's dramatic flair. The portrayal of characters in his plays such as Shakuntala reflects Bhasa's influence. Both playwriters share an obsession with emotional depth, complex character arcs, and writing the kinds of leads that make them comfortable in the theatres of their age and allow them to delve into universal themes like love, duty, and redemption. "Bhasa is in no way inferior to Kalidasa from the point of dramatic genius. Before Kalidasa's time several dramatists had written different kinds of dramas. But before Bhasa, dramas that could
be taken as guide or copied were rare"(Chaturvedi 249).

Bhavabhuti and Vishakhadatta, notable dramatists of later periods, also bear the impact of Bhasa's work(Sarkar). The influence of Bhasa on the regional traditions of modern Indian theatre is substantial and wide-ranging. His plays have been transformed into the various performance forms and styles across the Indian subcontinent, each interpreting Bhasa in unique ways. Bhasa's plays have been made into various types of performances, such as Kathakali, which is a dance drama that uses elaborate costumes, gestures, and facial expressions. This performance style epitomizes Bhasa's emphasis on the kind of elaborate stagecraft that makes his plays work on a visual, as well as an aural, level. "As the sole extant form of traditional Sanskrit theatre in India, Kutiyattam literally means Combined Acting. Through the fourfold concept of acting dealt with in the Natyasastra namely Angika (movements of the body & the limbs), Vachika (verbal acting), Satwika (emotive acting) and Aharya (make-up & costuming), excerpts from the well-known Sanskrit plays of Sree Harsha, Neelakanta, Bhasa, Kulasekhara Varman, Bodhayana and others are presented on stage"("Kutiyattam"). Experimental theatre also makes use of Bhasa's innovative narrative structures and reinterprets them for contemporaneous audiences.

There are plentiful research opportunities for delving into the regional adaptations of Bhasa's plays and their transformations into contemporary formats like film, television, and digital theatre. Bhasa's work provides a unique vantage point for exploring the increasingly popular area of theatrical adaptations and for studying the performative and multimodal dimensions of modern theatre. A performative reading of Bhasa's plays across their various international and temporal contexts can help shed light on the dramatic evolution and enduring legacy of Bhasa's plays. They aren't just ancient artifacts but living texts that get interpreted in diverse ways across different cultures and theatrical practices.

Bhasa's work is still relevant today because its themes are universal. Take, for example, the theme of the struggle between duty and desire, which many of us can relate to. Or consider his take on the nature of power. That what makes a drama complex is "the intricacies of human relationships." These are the kinds of things that make for good, if not great, drama. And they remain a relevant part of the human experience.

WORKS CITED

1. *Britannica, The Editors of Encyclopaedia. "Bhāsa". Encyclopedia Britannica, 17 Apr. 2024,3 https://www.britannica.com/biography/Bhasa.*
2. *Chaturvedi, Sudhanshu. "Bhasa and Kalidasa." Indian Literature, vol. 55, no. 6 (266), 2011, pp. 248–56. JSTOR, http://www.jstor.org/stable/23348759.*
3. *DEVADHAR, C. R. "THE PLAYS ASCRIBED TO BHĀSA, THEIR AUTHENTICITY AND MERITS (Continued)." Annals of the Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute, vol. 8, no. 1, 1926, pp. 17–42. JSTOR, http://www.jstor.org/stable/44028009.*
4. *Gerow, Edwin, and Bhāsa. "Bhāsa's Ūrubhaṅga and Indian Poetics." Journal of the American Oriental Society, vol. 105, no. 3, 1985, pp. 405–12. JSTOR, https://doi.org/10.2307/601517.*
5. *Kutiyattam – Kerala Kalamandalam. https://kalamandalam.ac.in/kutiyattam/*
6. *Sarkar, Jayanta. "Bhāsa/as a Dramatist." SANSKRIT BHUVAN, 2 Mar. 2023, www.sanskritbhuvan.com/2020/08/Bhasa.html.*
7. *Woolner, A. C., and Lakshman Sarup. Thirteen Plays of Bhasa: Pratijnayaugandharayana, Svapnavasavadatta, Carudatta, Pancaratra, Madhyamavyayoga, Pratima-nataka, Dutavakya, Dutaghatotkaca, Karnabhara, Urubhanga, Avimaraka, Balacarita, Abhiseka. Motilal Banarsidass, 1985.*