Bhasa: The Eminent Poet

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ABSTRACT: Bhasa is an ancient poet, much anterior to Kalidasa. The grammatical irregularities and archaic forms found in Bhasa’s works point to a date when Panini’s grammar had not been universally accepted. Through this paper, I discussed about the prominent characteristics of Bhasa’s plays.

Key Words: Bhasa, Kalidasa, Drama, Ramayana, Mahabharata

I. INTRODUCTION

Bhasa is an earliest well known Sanskrit dramatist. Majority of his dramas are brilliant modifications on the stories of great Indian epics Ramayana and Mahabharata. Bhasa’s predominance is seen in the works of great dramatist Kalidasa. Bhasa has made his own techniques for the staging of his plays. For example in the plays like Balacharita and Urubhanga, Bhasa made the characters dying on the stage. According to Bharata’s ’Natyasastra’, there is a rule that a play shall not end in a tragedy. But in Urubhanga, the play ends with the death of the main character Duryodhana.

II. DISCOVERY OF DRAMAS

By the discovery of thirteen dramas about the year 1909-1910, by the late M.M. Ganapatisastri of Trivandrum, it seems that the lost treasure of the plays of the famous dramatist Bhasa was recovered and Bhasa ceased to be a mere name. The palm leaf manuscript of Natakas is discovered in the Manalikkara Matom near Padmanabhapuram. It was found to contain 105 leaves with ten lines of twenty granthas in each page written in old Malayalam characters. On examination, the manuscript was found to contain the following Rupakas.

1. Madhyamavayayogam
2. Pancaratram
3. Doottavakyam
4. Doottaghatotkacham
5. Karnabharam
6. Urubhangam
7. Pratimanatakam
8. Abhishekanatakam
9. Balacharitrnam
10. Pratijnayaugandharayanam
11. Svapnasavadattam
12. Avimaracakam
13. Chraudattam.

The first six of these are based on the Mahabharata. Pratimanatakam and Abhishekanatakam on the Ramayan Balacharitrnam based on Harivamsha and Pratijnayaugandharayanam and Svapnasavadattam are based on the stories of Vatsaraja and Vasavadatta. The source of Avimaracakam and Chraudattam cannot be definitely traced.
III. AUTHORSHIP OF 13 PLAYS

There is no mention of the author's name in any one of these 13 plays. Most of the scholars like Mr. S.M. Paranjape, Mr. Keith, Mr. P.V. Kane, Mr. Rangacharya Reddy, Dr. Barnett, and Prof. Winternitz agree that all the thirteen plays are written by one and the same author. The grounds on which the common authorship of the plays has been established may be briefly stated thus:-

(1) All these plays begin with the stage direction “naadyanthe tatah pravishyathi soothradharah” whereas the classical dramas begin with the Nandi.

(2) In these plays the word 'Sthapana' is invariably used for the prologue, whereas in the classical dramas the word 'Prasthapana' is used.

(3) In none of these plays the name of the dramatist is mentioned where as in the classical plays the name of the dramatist and his family history are given.

(4) In most of these dramas the names of the chief Dramatist Personae are mentioned in the opening verse. This is technically called Mudralamkar [1].

(5) The Bharatavakyas of the plays are almost the same “immamapi mahim krtsnaam rajasimha:prashastu na” [2]; is repeated with a slight variation in many plays.

(6) In these plays grammatical solecisms or archaisms are very common.

(7) In most of these plays a dramatic device called Pataakasthana (i.e a short of dramatic irony) is used.

With these statements, it is now generally accepted that these thirteen plays are the stage versions of Bhasa's original works carefully preserved by the professional actors, the Chakyars who used to stage them. This is certain that, these thirteen plays have come from a single author and that author deserves all the praise bestowed on Bhasa by Kalidasa, Bana and many other poets and critics of ancient India [3].

The principle arguments which Ganapatisastri has advanced to support his Bhasa theory may be briefly stated thus:-

(1) The numerous grammatical archaisms in disregard of Panini's rules show that the author of these plays must have lived before Panini.

(2) The disregard that is shown to certain rules found in the Natyasastra in these plays, shows that their author was an ancient poet.

(3) Tradition ascribes the authorship of the Svapnavasavadattam, one of these thirteen plays, to Bhasa [4]. Therefore the author of the Svapnavasavadattam and the other closely similar plays must be Bhasa himself, who has been extolled by Kalidasa and Bana.

(4) Kalidasa has borrowed some expressions an idea from some of these plays. A poet like Kalidasa would imitate only a great poet like Bhasa, whom he has highly praised and placed at the head of the ancient poets of great renown.

IV. DATE OF BHASA

The date of Bhasa, like that of many other Sanskrit writers is very difficult to determine for want of sufficient data and of reliable chronology do draw our conclusion Bhasa's date isn't possible to fix accurately. We do not know when and where he lived. Even the word Bhasa doesn't appear to be the real name of the dramatist.

Bhasa is an ancient poet, much anterior to Kalidasa, is a fact established beyond doubt by the very reference to him by that poet in the prologue of the Malavikagnimitra [5]. Bhasa hasn't followed the rules of dramaturgy laid down by Bharata in the Natyasastra and has even described the death of the hero on the stage in one of his plays Urubhanga, which is prohibited in Natyasastra.

The grammatical irregularities and archaic forms found in Bhasa's works point to a date when Panini's grammar had not been universally accepted.

Bhasa being named by Banabhata in his Harshacharita can by no means be placed later than the 7th century A.D. Keith places Bhasa in about 300 A.D before Kalidasa who is said to have flourished during the reign of Chandra Gupta-II who ruled up about to 413 A.D. But has not adduced arguments for his stand from which a convincing result can be drawn up.

Sten konow identifies to Rajasimha referred by Bhasa with Western Kshatrapa Rudra Simha-I, who became Mahakshatrapa during 2nd century A.D from the Bharata Vakyas of Bhasa's dramas and assigns Bhasa to the 2nd century A.D. But his arguments aren't conclusive as identification has not been established with any degree of certainty [6].
There are echoes of Bhasa in the works of Kalidasa. This shows Bhasa was well-known by the 1st century B.C. Moreover Winternitz holds that the court life of kings depicted by Bhasa is simpler than those of Kalidasa.

The Pratimagruha in Bhasa's Pratimanataka in act III seems to have been echoed in the Kundamala of Dinnaga, is certainly a reference to a very old custom. The discovery of human heads and statues among the Mohenjodaro excavations proves that the custom of erecting statues of men belongs to the hoary antiquity. The story of the golden image at Seetha in the Ramayana itself is a pointer to the fact that the erection of some form of statue of the near and dear ones was prevalent at least in the period. In consideration of this, it may be said that Bhasa refers to a very old custom but this cannot prove its antiquity.

Bharatavakyas found in Bhasa's plays indicate that the whole of Northern India bounded by Vindhya and Himavat was under the control of one King Rajasimha which is possibly not a proper name of a King [7]. Chandra Gupta is said to be the first Emperor who brought under his rule the whole of Northern India, while Pusalker thinks that Ugrasena Nanda may also in a sense, deserve this appellation.

M.M. Haraprasad Sastri identifies Rajasimha with one of the Nandas. Dr. U.N. Ghosal in fact describes Ugrasena Mahapadma as the founder of the first real empire. Bhasa being probably anterior to Kautalya is obviously prior to Chandra Gupta also [8].

Bhasa's plays depict the name and cities of the North and sociological conditions which are common with those available in Maurya period. So the supposition that Bhasa flourished before Chandra Gupta's conquest of the South is corroborated from the facts noted above. Bhasa was certainly a talented dramatist judging from the number and variety of dramas. His style is simple, clear and sweet. He was called a Sage, of the class of Vyasa or Valmeeki. He was a pious devotee of Vishnu and probably a Brahmin.

In his work Pratimanataka, Bhasa refers to the Arthasastra of Brihaspati and not to that of Kautalya. This is an indication that he must have lived at a time when Kautalya's Arthasastra of Brihaspathi and not to that of Kautalya. This is an indication that he must have lived at a time when Kautalya's Arthasastra was not written or hadn't gained fall recognition and popularity.

Bhasa was certainly a talented dramatist judging from the number and variety of dramas. His style is simple, clear and sweet. He was called a sage, of the class of Vyasa of Valmiki. He was a pious devotee of Vishnu and probably a Brahmin.

Bhasa belonged to North India [9]. Most of the scenes in his plays have places in North India. He ignored the rivers and the mountains of the South India. He lived a very happy and contained life. He suffered neither from poverty nor enjoyed any patronage.

Hence any date assigned to Bhasa beginning from the 5th century B.C to the 4th century A.D is not fully convincing and free from any doubt. Thus under the present state of our knowledge, only this much can be asserted that Bhasa is an ancient dramatist and he flourished before Kalidasa.

REFERENCE