



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. *Madhyamavyayogam*
2. *Pancharatram*
3. *Dootavakyam*
4. *Dootaghatotkacham*
5. *Karnabharam*
6. *Urubhangam*
7. *Pratimanatakam*
8. *Abhishekanatakam*
9. *Balacharitam*
10. *Pratijnayaugandharayanam*
11. *Svapnavasavadattam*
12. *Avimarakam*
13. *Chrudattam*.

The first six of these are based on the *Mahabharata*. *Pratimanataka* and *Abhishekanataka* on the *Ramayan* *Balacharitam* based on *Harivamsha* and *Pratijnayaugandharayana* and *Svapnavasavadattam* are based on the stories of *Vatsaraja* and *Vasavadatta*. The source of *Avimarakam* and *Charudattam* 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. Rangacharaya 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 *Pataakasthan* (*i.e* a sort 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 *Banabhatta* 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* found 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 no written or hadn't gained full 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 *Vishu* 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*.

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