

Kalidasa and Bharata

I will be talking about **Kalidasa**, one of India's most celebrated playwrights and the relationship of his plays to the rules of drama set out by the **Natyasastra** which is believed to have been written by **Bharata**. In doing so, I will be taking Kalidasa's plays, particularly the **Sakuntala**, his most renowned work, and examining the influence of the Natyasastra on them.

The most important text of dramaturgy that ancient India produced is the Natyasastra. The title literally means "**drama science**" but a cursory review of the text indicates that this is more than a science of drama; it is a veritable encyclopedia of knowledge concerning Sanskrit drama and theatre, the most comprehensive work of its kind to survive anywhere from ancient times. Scholars differ on the date of the composition of the Natyasastra. Based on internal evidence, it is generally believed to have been composed during the period between 200 B.C. and 200 A.D. Although the authorship is traditionally attributed to the sage Bharata, an unevenness of writing styles has led some critics to conclude that it is the work of several hands. The work consists of numerous chapters, beginning with the origins of theatre. Within its scope are a multitude of topics such as theatre architecture, acting, costuming, makeup, properties, dance, music, play construction, poetic composition, grammar, composition of theatre companies, audiences, dramatic competitions, the actor community, and ritual observances, to name the more important. The text has exerted a profound influence over the formation and structure of successive theatre genres throughout India. Our understanding of the musical and dance system of ancient India are based almost entirely on the NS. By comparing the rules of play construction outlined therein with the works of several generations of playwrights, scholars have built a considerable body of dramatic criticism.

The NS categorized playwrights among the members of a theatre company. Although it is possible that playwrights were regularly engaged in the service of a company, it is doubtful that the famous ones were ever permanently attached to theatre organizations. Playwrights were generally accorded a much higher social status than the other members of the theatre companies. Many playwrights are known to have been members of the royal court. Even some kings composed plays. While we know relatively little about the lives of the members of the theatre companies, we have a somewhat more vivid picture of the playwrights, in part because they have left their works behind and because they enjoyed a degree of social prestige.

Unquestionably one of India's greatest playwrights is Kalidasa, whose dates and life are still uncertain. Scholars hold widely differing views about the period in which Kalidasa lived and worked. There are those who place him as early as 150 B.C., others place him in the late fifth century A.D., a span of more than 500 years! A widely held belief is that he was one of the nine "jewels" of the court of King **Vikramaditya Maurya**, who is thought have reigned around the mid 1st century B.C. Some scholars place Kalidasa in the early to mid 5th century A.D. at the court of **Chandragupta II** of **Ujjain**. Very little is known of this great literary figure. He is thought to have settled in Ujjain, although his work reflects a wide knowledge of Indian geography and familiarity with terrain that one

might have acquired only through travel. He is thought to have been a Brahman by caste and worshipper of Siva, whom he honors in the benedictions to his play. The poet wrote only 3 plays. **Sakuntala** (heroic romance) is regarded as his masterpiece. His other plays, the **Malavikagnimitra** (secular romance) and **Vikramorvasiya** (heroic romance) are both named after their central characters. His poems include a lyric monologue of nature, **Meghaduta** (The Cloud Messenger), and two long lyric narratives, **Raghuvamsa** (The Lineage of Raghu) and **Kumarasambhava** (The Birth of Siva's Son)

Sanskrit drama was first introduced to the West in 1789 in William Jones's translation of its foremost creation- the Sakuntala. Two years after this, the German translation of this play by Forster influenced Goethe who burst into a sonnet of praise for the play, and imitated its prologue in his *Faust*. These are the words of Goethe:

*"If you want the bloom of youth and fruit of later years,
If you want what enchants, fulfills, and nourishes,
If you want heaven and earth contained in one name-
I say Sakuntala and all is spoken."*

The Sakuntala has had many enthusiastic admirers in the West as well as in India, where from the time of its composition it has been considered a masterpiece. It has been translated often, into every European language, and has been the subject of commentaries and critical studies in Sanskrit and other Indian languages.

The NS identifies ten major types of plays and Kalidasa's Sakuntala is a model of a Nataka the characteristics of which are that it has as its subject matter a well-known story concerning the exploits of a hero who is either a royal sage or a king; the dominant sentiment of the work should be either love or heroism; and the extant nataka normally have no fewer than 5 and no more than 7 acts each. Kalidasa refers to Bharata in most of his work. In **Kumarasambhava**, he uses the technical vocabulary of Bharata to describe the first dramatic production, as it was presented to Siva and Parvati in celebration of their marriage. Kalidasa says nothing about the subject of the play that Siva and Parvati watched but the techniques referred to in the verse leave little doubt that he knew the abstract theatrical conventions codified in the *Natyasastra* and composed his dramas for performance in this style. In the **Malavikagnimitra**, the king's wives and members of the court study dance and drama. **Malavika**, the heroine of the play, is a student of the palace dancing master, **Ganadasa**. Her performance in the 2nd act of the play is much appreciated by the king and the entire audience. In discussing it, Kalidasa's characters apply concepts of dramatic theory as specified by Bharata. In the **Vikramorvasiya**, the plot turns on Urvashi who is the prize pupil of Bharata, the legendary theoretician of drama who is an offstage character in this play; she performs in the plays he directs for the pleasure of the gods. We learn about the play's performance from a dialogue between two students of Bharata.

Bharata divides acting into 4 components:

Angika: Acting through the body (gestures & movements of body, hands & eyes).

Vachika: Acting through speech relating to voice intonation, recitation and singing.

Aharya: Acting through accessories, which include makeup, costume and jewelry

Sattvika: Acting through signs of emotion relating to the physical manifestations of emotional states.

A language of gesture developed as a distinctive feature of the Indian stage from the earlier times. Kalidasa's plays, so rich in verbal images, depend upon gesture for the full expression of their texts. In the first meeting of Sakuntala and **Dusyanta** (the hero of *Sakuntala*), the heroine barely speaks. The king recites verse after verse, and while this verbal poetry is being presented, the heroine represents her responses through gesture and dance, visually expressing the text through her movements.

The gist of the story of Sakuntala is as follows. Dusyanta, the warrior-hero meets and falls in love with Sakuntala, the beautiful heroine when he happens upon the hermitage where she lives. They are married by mutual consent and Dusyanta leaves for his kingdom with Sakuntala's promise to join him after fulfilling her duties at the hermitage. Due to her wandering thoughts about him, she neglects to serve a hotheaded sage who promptly curses her to be forgotten by the one she is thinking of. As a result, during her journey to join Dusyanta, she loses the keepsake ring which he gave her. This causes Dusyanta to forget her. Humiliated, Sakuntala is carried away by a celestial nymph to a far off place where she spends several years and gives birth to Dusyanta's son. The ring is recovered by a fisherman and upon seeing it, Dusyanta's memory is restored. He then finds Sakuntala and is re-united with her and their son.

I will now analyze the composition of Sakuntala to compare it with the composition of a drama that Bharata dealt with.

Benediction & Prologue:

Just prior to the main body of Sakuntala, there is a short benediction to Siva and a prologue announcing the drama in the form of a conversation between the stage manager and an actress. These rituals set the tone for the opening scene and serve as a bridge between the audience and the world of the play. According to the *Natyasastra*, the benediction and prologue are features of a much more extensive set of introductory items.

Composition:

The smallest unit of composition of any play is an act and the NS says that an act should portray the change in the hero's basic situation and thus cause the plot to develop. It is made up of a series of incidents directly related to the exploits of the hero, heroine, or a person of similar importance and not to the minor characters. Certain events like the pronouncement of a curse, a marriage ceremony, a battle, loss of a kingdom, or death should not be portrayed. These restrictions forced playwrights to focus on scenes which at first glance seem inconsequential. In the first 3 acts, Kalidasa has chosen to focus on seemingly minor events in the lives of the chief characters and only mentions the major events in the prologue to Act IV. He is more interested in showing the subtle and delicate human emotions of the central characters.

Plot:

According to the NS, the principal objective of the plot is to show the hero struggling for and finally attaining the object of his desire. Subsidiary incidents may contribute to this aim but should not divert attention from it. There are five stages in the development of the action in the plot.

1st stage refers to the planting of the seed or germ- the desire on the part of the hero to obtain his objective. In *Sakuntala* the king's objective is to wed Sakuntala and to get an heir to his throne in Act I.

2nd, there is a determined effort to achieve the object of desire, which is clear from Dusyanta's determination in Act II, to take Sakuntala as his wife.

3rd, there is hope of success. This is shown in Act III where Dusyanta is confident of winning Sakuntala, although she does not commit herself to fulfilling his wishes.

4th, success is assured if only a difficulty may be overcome. In Acts IV, V, and VI, Dusyanta's original desires are thwarted and delayed. In Act IV, Sakuntala is cursed to be forgotten by the king. In Act V, as a result of the curse, he does not recognize her and in her humiliation she leaves. In Act VI, when the king's keepsake ring is found, his memory is immediately restored and he bemoans the loss of his beloved.

The 5th stage occurs when the hero attains the object of his desire which is shown in the final act of *Sakuntala* where the 2 are re-united and Dusyanta discovers that he is the father of a fine son and heir to their throne.

Time and Place:

The NS says that the events of an act should take place in the course of a single day. But some events which take longer such as battles, were reported through a clever device, the introductory scene in which minor characters reported the events which have intervened between acts. The rules for establishing and changing locations in a Sanskrit play were flexible. An act might begin in one spot and simply by performing a symbolic movement, such as walking around, the actors indicated that they had moved to another location. At the beginning of *Sakuntala*, for eg., the king and his charioteer are traveling in the sky on a magic chariot in pursuit of a deer. The description of the landscape below by the actors during the chase helps the spectators to imagine the rapid change of place.

Character:

In the Sanskrit plays, most characters are types: the **just, powerful, handsome, benevolent hero** and his equivalent, **the beautiful and virtuous heroine; the witty, proverbially hungry clown-companion; trusted and loyal ministers; charming and witty servants**; and so on. In *Sakuntala*, **Dusyanta** is the warrior-hero accompanied by his buffoon friend. **Sakuntala** is the beautiful heroine accompanied by her charming friends **Anasuya** and **Priyamvada**. Although these characters were cast to type, Kalidasa constructed each one of them especially Sakuntala, imaginatively and creatively.

Purpose of Drama:

Sanskrit theatre was a model of human behavior and in this it served a very definite educational function. According to Indian philosophy, the people are but part of a larger universal order. An individual plays an important part, but when he or she neglects some duty the system is threatened. In *Sakuntala*, all seems well at the end of Act III, but in

the prologue to Act IV, her friends report that she has been so engrossed in thinking about Dusyanta that she neglects to offer proper respects to a hotheaded sage who comes as a guest to the hermitage. He curses her to be forgotten by the person of whom she is thinking. Sakuntala is thus doomed to spend many long years away from her beloved. Fate thus plays an important part in Sanskrit plays. The characters are ruled by duty and the slightest infringement of social contract brings serious consequences.

Sanskrit names and words used during the lecture

Kalidasa:	Indian playwright
Natyasastra:	Treatise on drama
Bharata:	Author of Natyasastra
Sakuntala:	Heroine of <i>Sakuntala</i>
Vikramaditya Maurya,	Kings in whose courts Kalidasa
Chandragupta:	is thought to have resided
Ujjain:	City that Chandragupta ruled
Siva:	One of the Gods in the Indian trinity
Sakuntala, Malavikagnimitra,	
Vikramorvasiya:	Plays by Kalidasa
Meghaduta, Raghuvamsa,	
Kumarasambhava:	Poems by Kalidasa
Nataka:	Type of play identified by Natyasastra
Malavika:	Heroine of <i>Malavikagnimitra</i>
Ganadasa:	Dance teacher of Malavika
Angika:	Acting through the body (gestures & movements of body, hands & eyes).
Vachika:	Acting through speech relating to voice intonation, recitation and singing.
Aharya:	Acting through accessories, which include makeup, costume and jewelry.
Sattvika:	Acting through signs of emotion relating to the physical manifestations of emotional states.
Dusyanta:	Hero of <i>Sakuntala</i>
Anasuya & Priyamvada:	Friends of Sakuntala

SOURCES

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Sanskrit Drama in Performance (edited by Rachel Van M. Baumer & James R. Brandon)