



वागर्थः

(An International Journal of Sanskrit Research)

Journal Homepage: <http://cphfs.in/research.php>



Abhijnānaśākuntalam on Modern Stage

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Sir William Jones started learning Sanskrit after his arrival in Calcutta. He came to know that there were *kāvya*s – poems and plays in Sanskrit, and studied *Abhijñāśākuntala* (AS) of Kālidāsa. In 1787, he started translating the AS in English completed the translation on August 17th in 1788; and in 1789 his edition of AS with the translation was published. This became an epoch-making event. It was reprinted five times in England between 1790 and 1807 (India Inscribed: European and British Writing on India, p.5). It was the dawn of a new era, ‘termed the Sacountala era by the French writer, Raymond Schwab in his *Oriental Renaissance*, due to the unprecedented interest created by the play, bringing up a real *coup de théâtre* in the history of ideas and sensibilities’ (Lyne Bansat-Boudon : The Reception of Asian Performing Arts in XVII-XX Century Europe – The Case of France) Even though the translations of *Bhagavadgītā* and *Hitopadeśa* had just come out four years before Jones published his translation of the AS, it was really Kālidāsa’s play ‘that truly initiated the oriental renaissance’ (The Reception of Asian Performing Arts in XVII-XX Century Europe – The Case of France) in a crucially important period of world history when the French Revolution was happening and the Romanticism was being introduced together with a new consciousness of human values. Śakuntlā appeared in this scenario to play a decisive role in the making of history. It was a miraculous discovery for Goethe, who wrote a poem on Śakuntalā. When the

French scholar, Chézy sent him in *Editio Princeps of Śakuntalā* (1830) with translation and notes with the citation of Goethe’s poem, Goethe, his enchantment for *Śakuntalā*, remaining undiminished even after forty years, thanked Chézy and wrote to him that ‘Śakuntalā has been a start for him that made night more pleasant than day and it had marked an epoch in his life (The Reception of Asian Performing Arts in XVII-XX Century Europe – The Case of France).’ The AS, through this translation by William Jones, Foster and Chézy became in France an exemplification of new human values and romanticism.

It was an Indian poet who opened the eyes of the west – writes Stein Konow – ‘Through William Jonbe’s translation of Kālidāsa’s *Śakuntalā* Europe came to know of something of India’s soul, about the ideals, the aims and the aspirations of the people of India. And this led to a keen interest in India, her history and civilization.”

The publication of AS also created a worldwide interest in Indian classics and helped to usher in an era of renaissance in India also. AS in this sense became a symbol of India’s National Identity

With this, *Kālidāsa* was introduced on modern Indian stage. *AS* was performed immediately after its first publication by William Jones. The performance was made in Calcutta Theatre in 1789. The significance of this

performance must be understood in the light of the fact that Calcutta Theatre, ever since its inception in 1779, has been producing only English plays by authors like Shakespeare till then. That it chose to perform the English translation of *AS* by Sir William Jones soon after its publication shows the impact that *Kālidāsa's* play had created in literary circles.

Since then the play was taken up by the most eminent theatre directors in India and other countries—*Radhey Shyam Kathavachak*, *Ebrahim Alkaji*, *Prathviraj Kapoor*, *Adya Rangacharya*, *Narendra Sharma*, *B.V. Karanth*, *Grotowsky*, *Prasanna*, *Subbanna*, *Rita Ganguli*, *Shyamanand Jalan* and *Sanakya Ebotombi* are just a few names to cite. This paper intends to investigate a few of its performances from the following points -

- Kālidāsa's play as an impetus to renaissance in nineteenth century
- Search for Indian Theatre through *AS*.
- Sanskrit theatre in the context of global theatre

This also started the series of attempts at the presentation of *AS* on the nineteenth century stage in India and other countries as well. Gérard de Nerval presented an adaptation of Kālidāsa's play for the French stage around 1850 (I am thankful to Professor Pierre Syvain Filliozat for this information). In 1858, Gautier adopted *AS* in the form of a ballet which was performed at the Opera de Paris on July 14th by Reyer. Lyne Bansat Boudon terms it 'the first comeback on stage of a work that had been so far mainly praised for its poetic perfection,' she also says that 'the date of July 14th reinforces the hypothesis of a secret affinity between Śakuntalā and French revolution (The Reception of Asian Performing Arts in XVII-XX Century Europe – The Case of France). Michelet published *The Women* in 1859, in which Kālidāsa's heroine was eulogized with an advise to young ladies initiated into the joy of love to read the play (The Reception of Asian Performing Arts in XVII-XX Century Europe – The Case of France).

In India, some Parsi theatre companies initially attempted to put *AS* on stage. The play was adapted in Urdu or Hindustani. There is a reference to a play *Śakuntlā* having been presented on stage by Haphez Mohammad in 1886. Agra Natak Maṇḍalī was established by Mirza Nazir Beg performed *AS* at Bareilly in 1899.

There are translations/ renderings of *AS* by veteran authors of Parsi theatre like Arama, Radhey Shayam Kathavachaka (1932) and Narayan Prasad Betab (1945) (Betab was supposed to be one of the greatest and most successful amongst playwrights aligned to Parsi theater). Kathavachaka had scripted *AS* for a Bombay film. A great

dramatist and script writer Kathavachak tried to bring the beauty of Kālidāsa's play in his rendering. Both Kathavachaka and Arama had scripted their adaptations in the form of dance dramas, whereas Betab's rendering is nearer to the original and is in mixed prose and verse. All these were written for stage purpose. The script created on the basis on Kathavachak's translation was used for a film in 1931 (Agyat : *Bharatīya Raṅgamancha kā vivecanītmaka Itihāsa* : p. 254).

As parsi theatre catered to popular taste, the attempts to put *AS* were marred with vulgarity. Kunvarji Nazir was the proprietor of Vicotoria Natak Mandali, one of the pioneer theatre companies of those days. He was touring with his production of Śakuntalā between 1874 to 1876 from Calcutta to Kashi. *Kashi Patrikā*, a periodical, published the reviews of the performance on 10th June 1875, commenting that the performance did not rise to the expectations. (*Kashi Patrikā*, June 30, 1875, Q in Agyat : *Bharatīya Raṅgamancha kā vivecanītmaka Itihāsa* : p. 254).

One of the notable translations in Urdu is by Ganesh Prasad Farrukhabadi which was completed in VS 1947 (1890 AD). The author seem to have gone through Kālidāsa's original play but rendered it in gazals and Hindi metres like Doha, Sorathā etc. Ram Narayan Agrawal has produced some of the citations which bring out the liberties taken by the translator with the original, to the extent of creating his own stamp in the verses:

गज़ल शकुंतला राग पीलू
 ये कब है सनम दिल लगाने के काबिल
 मुसाफिर हैं दिल के जलाने के काबिल
 मैं दुख्तर गदा की ये सुलतान आलम
 महबूबत हैं कब ये निभाने के काबिल
 फँसा इनका दिल है किसी माहरू से
 ये कब नाज उल्फत उठाने के काबिल
 चले जायेंगे बेमुरबबत वतन को
 इधर कब ये तशरीफ लाने के काबिल
 लगायेंगे ये मेरी सौतन को सीने
 तसव्वुर में मुकदिल दुखाने के काबिल
 मुझे इनका एतबार हर्गिज नहीं हैं,
 ये मेर मतलब की बातें बनाने के काबिल
 गणेश जब लगी प्यारी पी के गले से
 हुई गुफ्तगू दिल लुभाने के काबिल
 सोरठा-
 भौ गंधर्व विवाह शकुंतला दुष्यंत को
 लखि अपार उत्साह अमर सुमन वर्षन लगे।।
 दोहा-

शादी आबादी अजब, हुआ चमन आबाद
गानें लगीं सहेलियाँ सखी मुबारकबाद।।
गज़लॉतुम्हें दुष्यंत राजा की नयी रानी मुबारक हो
नई उल्फत नई सायत नऊ जानी मुबारक हो
जो आये सोम तीरथ से मुनी अहले करामाती
खबर सुन शादमानी की ये महिमानी मुबारक हो
दुआ देती दिलो जाँ से रहो आबाद आलम में
सदा दुलहन को दुलहे की निगेहबानी मुबारत हो
गणेश जिस गुल के यौवन की जहाँ में रोशनी रोशन
मदनमोहन की है मुझ पर मेहेरबानी मुबारक हो।।

Bharatendu the most outstanding poet, author and dramatist of this period in Northern India, and an actor and theatre director as well, who created an era (Bharatendu-yuga) by his writings and journalism in the history of Hindi literature, was in the audience. The performance was quite unpalatable for him and when the actor performing Duṣyanta started dancing with twists and turns of his waist, singing a cheap song, Bharatendu was furious and got up with his colleagues- Dr. Thiebo and Babu Pramath Dash, - and walked away, saying – now this is completely unbearable! They are butchering Kālidāsa!’ (Bhāratendu Granthāvali, p. 753).

This led to a series of good translations of Kālidāsa exploring the possibilities of their performance. Rājā Lakshaman Singh, one of the laureates of nineteenth century Hindi literature published his translation. Vrindavanlal Verma, a well known Hindi novelist, remembers to have seen the performance of this translation around 1905 at Jhansi.

But neither Bharatendu’s endeavours nor the performances of some of these literary translations by celebrated authors could stop the journey of Kālidāsa’s masterpiece on Parsi theatre through popular renderings. One of the performances was even given before the Prince of Wells at Madras by Dadi Patel, under the banner of Original Victoria Company around 1875.

The search for Indian identity through the *AS* via Parsi theatre did not come an end. The milieu still believed that a happy marriage of *AS* and Parsi theatre was possible. In 1920, Maharaja Bhavani Singh of Jhalawad, a state in Rajasthan, started a very ambitious project of building a theatre in the backward city of Jhalawad. The opening of the theatre was marked by the performance of *AS* itself on 16th July 1921. Female roles were played by male actors. Nanhe Khan was playing the role of Sakuntalā, Chote Khan of Kaṇva and Mirza Nazir Beg ‘Nazir’ performed Duṣyanta. Kings from neighboring states were invited to witness the

grand opening. An inscription on marble stone was put with the note on the performance of *AS*.

Prithviraj Kapoor, a towering figure in theatre and cinema presented his version of *AS*, under the banner of Prithvi Theatres, one of the most dynamic repertoires of twentieth century. In fact, Kālidāsa’s play was the debut performance by the Prithvi Theatre. on 9th March, 1945 in the Opera House of Mumbai. The script of the play was given by Pundit Natayan Prasad ‘Betab’. ‘Betab’ was adamant and uncompromising on the style of Parsi theatre for the adoption.

Ujra Mumtaj, one of the most celebrated heroines of Bombay Film Industry performed Śakuntalā’s role, Prithviraj himself was Duṣyanta and his son, Shashi Kapoor, who was to be a popular hero in the coming years, played Bharata.

Through this performance, Prithviraj Kapoor wanted to align his theatre with Indian ethos and value system. A realistic touch was given to the presentation by creating scenes of royal court through wooden columns and painted walls and royal seat, and in the scene of hermitage, trees shown through cut outs of plywood. The play was presented in the style of Parsi theatre with certain improvisations and innovative designs. By using different spot lights, Kaṇva was shown witnessing the love scene between Duṣyanta and Śakuntalā. This was the first attempt to unearth a sub text of a Sanskrit drama on modern stage. Balwant Gargi, a theatre critic, remarks that the spirit of Kālidāsa was absent from the performance.

Nine shows were consecutively given at the Prithvi Theatres itself and all in all there were about 250 repeated shows all across the country, which was rather discouraging, considering that many of the popular plays by Prithviraj were performed more than 2000 times each.

A production of Kālidāsa’s *magnum opus* by as eminent a theatre person as Grotowski in 1960 was equally a failure, as it was ‘ironically aiming at showing to West the stereotyped image of Eastern theater that it generally builds’ (See Lyne Bansat Boudon’s article in this volume).

Meanwhile there were attempts to establish the glory of theatre and as a parallel force to Bombay cinema. Moonlight theatre was established at Calcutta in 1939 by Govardhan Mehrotra. The performance of *AS* under its banner was directed by Prem Shankar Narsi, one of the great actors and directors in Parsi Hindustani Theatre was established by Begum Kudasia Zaidi, and after the production of the *Mrcchakaṭika* under its banner, Narendra Sharma (1924-), one of the leading choreographers trained in Udaishankar’s

Almorha centre, and a well known Hindi poet, directed the AS for it. It was one of the most remarkable performances – an attempt to bring out the poetry and spirit of the play. Curtain was dropped only once – after the fourth act. In the scene of Duṣyanta’s hunting in the forest, groups of trees and wild animals – deers were shown moving along. This was the technique which Bharata in his Nāṭyaśāstra called *sañjīva* – representing living animals on the stage. The actors created the moving forest and whole ecology.

The Sunday Times of 17.07.1961 carries a detailed report of this performance. The reporter says - “The production had many graces. It had movement that flowed across the stage. Groups formed and broke and fell back into compositions that were marked by some inevitability. Choreography by Narendra Sharma was of good timing and finish. Décor by M.S Sathyu was adept, stage sets well devised, lighting controlled intelligently and with sensitiveness. The sheer mechanics of the play left little to be desired.” The critic is also all praise for the actress Archana Mohan who performed Śakuntalā. ‘She was persuasive of charm, and grace and a poetry of loving. Her movements were well modulated’.

Still, the story of this performance is a mixture of success and failure. The performance was designed as dance-drama, but the script given by Niaz Haider was loaded with dialogues emphasizing situations. So that the naturalistic design was in discord with the poetic.

During fifties and sixties of the past century, notable amongst the performances of Kālidāsa’s *magnum opus* were by Baba Dike under the banner of his Natya Bharati in 1962. Rahul Barpute, who was to become a leading journalist played Duṣyanta and Suman Dharmadhikari a well known actress of the group performed Śakuntalā. Baba Dike adopted the translation by Viraj, which was very unsuitable for theatre performance. The audience, the director of the play and the actors all were unsatisfied with the script (Agyat: *Bharatīya Raṅgamancha kā vivecanātmaka Itihāsa* : p. 298).

AS was staged by the Volos theatre group from Athens in Greek language and Greek style on 12 November 1986 in the occasion of Kalidasa festival at Ujjain. Śakuntalā was presented by three different female artists to bring out her transformation Chorus was presented in the Greek style.

Hindi translation of AS by Mohan Rakesh was taken up by eminent theatre directors like Ibrahim Alkaji, Prasanna, Rita Ganguli, Shyamanand Jalan and Sanakya Ebotombi between 1974 to 1987 (Pratibha Agrawal (ed.): *Bhāratīya Raṅgakośa*, p. 187).

When Ibrahim Alkaji joined the National School of Drama at Delhi in 1962, he had already undergone through an important phase of his career as a theatre director at Mumbai, the performance of Dharmavir Bharati’s *Andhāyuga* directed by him for Satyadev Dube’s Terrace Theatre heralded a new era in Hindi stage. Hindi translation of AS by Mohan Rakesh was one of the earliest productions (1963-64) under his direction at the NSD.

Another noteworthy performance of the AS was under the banner of Kālidāsa Academy of Allahabad around 1960. Shrikrihna Das, a veteran theatre activist organized the event. Surya Avasthi of Prayag Vidyapeeth is reported to have performed the role of Śakuntalā (Kālidāsīya nāṭya aur mere Raṅgānubhava –(Hindi). Kamlesh Datta Tripathi Punarnavā – Souvenir of Akhil Bhāratīya Kālidāsa Samāroha, Ujjain, 2006, p. 49-50). Tapas Sen, who acquired legendary fame for his light effects on theatre and in Bombay movies, was called from Calcutta light effects.

In last decades of the past century, there were attempts to establish a dialogue between theatre persons and Sanskrit scholars with a view to search the identity of Indian theatre through Nāṭyaśāstra.

The AS as per precepts of Bharata’s Nāṭyaśāstra was made by Puru Dadhich- himself a scholar of Bharata’s Nāṭyaśāstra and a dancer and Choreographer. He presented the play at Lucknow on 31st March 1980. The play was sponsored by Hindustani Sangita Mahavidyalaya and Akhil Bharatiya Sanskrit Parishad, Lucknow.

In eighties the play was taken up by a number of amateur repertoires. Kalaksetra of madras gave its performance with all the perfection of Rukmini Arundel’s masterpiece choreography at the Kālidāsa Samaroha (festival) at Ujjain in 1985. Another theatre group devoted to Sanskrit theatre, the Goa Hindu Association performed AS during this year on the same platform.

One of the most remarkable performances of AS was directed by Adya Rangacharya (R.V.Jagirdar), an eminent Kannada playwright and himself a scholar of Sanskrit drama and Nāṭyaśāstra. This performance was prepared for Kālidāsa Festival at Ujjain in 1976. It was an attempt to give a faithful representation of the original play in Sanskrit with emphasis on *vācika* and correct recitation. Adya Rangacharya had edited AS to prepare his stage version and and this script did justice to the original play. An attempt was made to render Kālidāsa’s poetic beauty and aesthetic universe on stage. The play moved in slow rhythm. Karanth had given some brilliant touches saving the performance from becoming too conventional or too realistic. It was also fascinating to listen to him with his musical notes in the

background. But on the whole, the performance lacked in perception and insight. The emphasis shifted at creating a physical stage as per the prescriptions of the Nāṭyaśāstra when Vijaya Mehta presented the Marathi translation of AS under the banner of the Gova Hindu Association Mumbai in 1985. Moments of rupture came during the course of performance but were lost in the paraphernalia. There was perfection in technique, in combinations of movements. The following stage designs from the Nāṭyaśāstra were adopted by Vijaya Mehta (i) Mattavāraṇī, (ii) Kutapa and vedi for seating the musicians, (iii) division between raṅgapītha and raṅgaśīrṣa., and to a certain extent (iv) the kākṣyāvibhāga or imaginary zonal divisions.

In the same year (1985), Shri Sinhajitsinha, a well-known exponent of Manipuri dance presented his rendering of AS. The performance was enlivened with rare grace and beauty. Through this performance the dance-guru was able to extend the frontiers of Manipuri dance form, and replenish the form with freshness of Kālidāsa's imagery.

In the Kālidāsa Samaroha of 1989, Shantinath Ghosh brought his repertoire from Kolkata to present the AS, and in 1994 S. Janaki, presented AS on the banner of Sanskrit Ranga- founded by her guru V Raghavan.

However, all these performances failed to rediscover the soul of Sanskrit theatre and to achieve a major breakthrough in the process of building up a national theatre.

Ujjain became a hub of Sanskrit theatre, and the AS providing invitation to emerging theatre directors for experimentations. Two young and talented artists presented AS in original Sanskrit - Dhirendrakumar in 1992 and Rajendra Avasthi in 2004. Sanskrit Theatre was resuscitated with inculcation of motifs from regional forms. Dhirendrakumar could create the new theatric universe through his AS because he had Ustad Omprakash Chaurasia as a singer with beautiful rendering of Kālidāsa's original verses through traditional Malwi music. Dhirendra used Malwi instead of Prakrit in the dialogues of female and characters of lower type. Dhirendra made profuse use of Chorus, rangapati and combination of forms like Pandavani, Manch and Chau. Shrinivas Rath had edited the Sanskrit script of AS for Avasthi's production. Costumes from Malwa, tunes of Malwi folk music and through imaginative use of choreography bordering on classical and embracing the regional dance forms added to the charm of this production. In 1997, Chetan Pandit, a young theatre director presented AS in Ujjain (These facts are based on the article of Shailendra Kumar Sharma in the Souvenir of Akhil Bhāratiya Kālidāsa Samāroha, Ujjain, 2006, pp.51-58). Yogesh Tripathi one of the emerging theatre directors from

the Baghelkhand region of Madhya Pradesh, produced the Bagheli version of AS under the banner of Kṣitija on 3rd November, 2009 under the Kālidāsa festival of Ujjain (These facts are taken from the Souvenir of Kālidāsa Festival, 2009 published by Kalidasa Sanskriti Akademi, Ujjain).

However, with the arrival of Kavalam Pannikar's version of Kālidāsa's *magnum opus*, the whole scenario became vibrant with new potential. The debut performance was given on the stage of Kālidāsa Samāroha at Ujjain on 13th November 1986. Subsequently, Pannikar himself replaced the robust and forceful voices of protest and challenge by the people or the prajā, a mark of his first presentation, by more mellow and subtle readings of the sub-text as understood by him. The play was transformed with different designs when the audiences beheld it almost after a gap of twenty five years in 2010 at the Bharata Bhavan, Bhopal. Pannikar gave brilliant touches by a very imaginative use of raṅgapāṭis and forms of traditional theatres of Kerala in some of the scenes. Pannikar had already made a long journey of his experimentations with Sanskrit drama and theatre in 1978 his production of the Madhyamavyāyoga formed a moment of history in this journey. After which he presented *Karṇabhāram* and *Urubhaṅgam*. His experiments of presenting the relationships between the individual and groups on stage found a fine expression in his production of the AS. Pannikar interpreted the whole text as an exposition of relations between the king and his subjects. The group of helpers in the hunting (*mṛgayā*) of Duṣyanta turn out to become the representatives of the people when the hunting for animals assumes the proportions of the hunting for human beings.

Pannikar's AS has become a memorable experience because of his very imaginative use of *raṅgapāṭis* or movable curtains. He could exhibit these movable curtains in as symbols of the trauma, inner conflicts and the psychic experiences of the characters of AS bringing out the inner core of the play.

In 1982, KV Subbanna was asked to direct Śākuntala for NSD by BV Katranth in Yakṣagāna style. Subbanna interpreted the play as text depicting conflict between two cultures – the culture of the city and the culture of the woods then he also visualised the culture of heaven, rāmna culture and Aryan culture. He divided the play in two parts constituting acts 1-IV and V to VII. More attention was paid to minor characters the maids, the attendants, the group of hunters, Kanva who is one of the most prominent characters in the play was relegated to the background and his appearance was merely suggested, The play was

translated by Subbanna into Kannada with improvisations. Short and simple lyrics were added to suit the style of Yakṣagāna. Open air theatre and open air platform were used for the performance (Community and Culture: K.V. Subbanna, 80-96).

Meanwhile, Sanakya Ebotombi presented a delicate and delightful version of *AS* in Manipuri style.

Even a cursory view of the performances of *AS* beginning from 1789 to 2012 confirms the fact that the masterpiece of Kālidāsa has never been just a drama and the performances were not given only for entertainment. Why should a Maharaja in a remote state in Rajasthan invite a troupe to perform *AS* for the premiere show of the newly built theatre house? Why Prithviraj Kapoor after the series of hilarious performances of his dramas like 'Deewar' or 'pathan'— which were enormous hits at the 'box office' and created records in the number of enraptured audiences - should turn to Kālidāsa's play and insist that the translation should be nearest to the spirit of the classic and evince Indian values.

Rashtriya Sanskrit Sansthan in its annual festival of Sanskrit Drama where ten troupes every year from its campuses participate, made a different kind of experiment with *AS* in the year 2011. All the seven acts were performed successively by seven different troupes.

AS in fact, helped in the search national identity as well as the theatrical identity of India. The failures in its performances are also symbolic in our search for our own identity.

To whom should be ascribe the responsibility of the failures in performance of *AS*? To Kālidāsa, who is soars far above in the sky of imagination and delights us by his poetry but creates problems for being put up on the stage; or to the directors who made attempts to present his play though their own fancies, and failed to grasp the inner core of the original playwright; or to the performers who were inept for creating the subtle imagery, the complicated moods of the characters and the world of emotions, or to the audiences who were not properly trained to rise from their own level to be able to travel to the pinnacles to which the play journeys. It is true that the *AS* has always been, and will remain a challenge.

Acknowledgments: I am extremely grateful to Natranga Pratishthan, New Delhi and its Secretary Mrs. Rashmi Bajpeyi for providing some photographs and copy of the new reporting of *AS* staged under the banner of Hindustani Theatre, to Kālidāsa Akademi, Ujjain and Prof. P.N. Shastri

for giving photographs of the performance by Volos theatre from Greece.

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