

Vedantic thoughts in Bhasa's Plays

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PAPER

The Upanishads, also hailed as the Vedanta are the principal text, which portray philosophy and deep musing of the seers of India. Since the beginning of literary pursuits in India, the Vedanta has ever been an inspiration to the writers of India, be it in the religious front or in the social quarters. Bhasa, who is one of the predominant of Sanskrit dramatist, is a writer par excellence who has been duly influenced by the profound thoughts of the Upanishads. Bhasa takes the tales of the epics and legends, and at once makes his noble characters speak in the language befitting the best of philosophers, be it the character of Krishna, Rama, Bharata and others. The present Paper is an attempt to appreciate the Upanishadic thoughts in Bhasa's Plays. The ten major Upanishads Isa, Kena, Katha, Prashna, Mundaka, Mandukya, Aitareya, Taittiriya, Brihadaranyaka, Candogya have only been taken for the purview of the Paper's study. All the thirteen plays of Bhasa shall be considered with the view-point of Vedantic influential sayings in them. Although there are hardly any verbatim quotations from the Upanishads in the Bhasa's plays, there are pregnant hints throughout Bhasa's work making one to infer that Bhasa was very well conversant with the Upanishads and philosophy. The present Paper shall contribute to our understanding Bhasa, not just as a poet but also as an Upanishadic philosopher.

We find the Bhasa is familiar with the then conventional study of the Upanishads and the Vedas. In the Fifth Act of the Pratima Natakam (Page 187), we find Ravana speaking the following words:

“I belong of the Kasyapa clan. I have studied the Veda with all its branches, the code of Manu, the Yogashastra of Maheshwara, Brihaspati's Science of Politics, the Logic of Medhatithi

and Pracetas' scripture on memorial rites.”¹ It becomes quite clear that the orthodoxy in study involved the study of the Vedas and the Vedangas, along with allied subjects like Logic during the days of Bhasa.

In the VI Act Avimaraka (Page 103), Narada remarks:

“With verses from the Veda, I propitiate the grandsire, Brahma, with songs make Hari thrill with joy. Day by day with various devices, I produce melodies for strings and quarrels in the world. (11)”²

The verses of the Vedas have been directly referred to in this lines.

Even among the mortals, the initiation into studies was in particular focus on the Vedas, as noted in the following: In the Svapnavasadatta, Act I (Page 44), the student remarks:

“I will tell you, sir. I am from Rajagriha. In order to specialize in Vedic studies, I took up my abode in Lavanaka; it's a village in the Vatsa country.”³

Similarly, the personalities conversant with the Vedas were looked upon with great respect, as can be seen in the following”

In the Avimaraka Act VI (Page 106-107), Avimaraka remarks:

“Why, here is the blessed Narada. His mind is set on praise and imprecation; his voice melodious in Vedic texts and songs. He toils to sow discord among the closest friends and sets things right when all seems lost. (16)”⁴

References to scriptures in general is also found throughout the works of Bhasa. It can be inferred that they belong to the class of the Vedanta. In the Svapnavasavadatta, Act II, (Page 48), Nurse remarks to Vasavadatta:

¹ Fifth Act of the Pratima Natakam (Page 187)

² VI Act Avimaraka (Page 103)

³ Svapnavasadatta, Act I (Page 44)

⁴ Avimaraka Act VI (Page 106-107)

“Madam, the hearts of great men are ruled by the Sacred Scriptures, and are therefore easy to console.”⁵

In the Madhyama Vyayoga Act I, (Page 146), the old man remarks:

“Out on you, Vile demon. Am i not a brahman?

A venerable Brahman, learned in the scriptures, how could I obtain salvation if I give my virtuous son to a cannibal? (13)”⁶

In the Pratima Natakam, Act V, (Page 184), Ravana remarks:

“Without a word of the other scriptures you show an interest in that of the memorial rites. Why so?”⁷

In the Avimaraka, Act I, (Page 58), Bhutika remarks to the king:

“What need of question him? His form divine, his speech saintly, with the brilliance of a warrior, tenderness and strength. If he be all that and yet truly of ignoble birth, then fruitless is our toil in studying the Scriptures. (7)”⁸

In the Balacaritam, Act I, (Page 114), Narada remarks:

“Ha! Now that the battles of the gods and the demons have come to an end, I find no enjoyment in a sky that is always calm. For in my leisure from study of scripture, I strike the strings and stir up strife. (4)”⁹

In the Pancharatra, the second Brahman remarks:

“Fire at the head of the greater deities is satisfied with oblations, the chief of the twice-born content with treasures. Full-fed are the flocks of birds and herds of kine, ail men in the world are

⁵ Svapnavasavadatta, Act II, (Page 48)

⁶ Madhyama Vyayoga Act I, (Page 146)

⁷ Pratima Natakam, Act V, (Page 184)

⁸ Avimaraka, Act I, (Page 58)

⁹ Balacaritam, Act I, (Page 114)

content. At present this world is altogether full of joy, eloquent of the king's good qualities. So by his virtues, all the universe has become an abode for the gods. (4)”¹⁰

“Isavasyamidam sarvam Yatkinca Jagatyam Jagat.

Tena Tyaktena Bhunjithah Magridah Kasyasivddhanam”¹¹

“All this is pervaded by the lord, he is immanent in the world. One should relish what is awarded by the lord, and nothing should be craved for by others.”

In the Balacaritam, Narada remarks:

“Here is the blessed Narayana--

He is the Ancient that supports all living things, the Banner of the Triple Word, Creator of the Universe. His large eyes are lovely as the lotus, but his strength is Limitless. Master of the mighty gods, he strikes down the power of demons.”¹²

“Yatca Kincit Jagat Sarva Drishyate Sruyatepi Va

Antarbhahisca Tatsarvam Vyapya Narayanah Sthitah”¹³

“Whatever the world that is seen or heard, is all that is pervaded within and without by Narayana”

In the Abhisheka Nataka, Act Vi, the celestial musicians remark:

Salutations to Narayana, cause of the triple world. Brahma is thy heart, Lord of the Triple World, Rudra is thy wrath. The Sun and Moon are thy two eyes, Lord of Gods, and Eloquence thy tongue. All three worlds with Brahma, Indra and the Marut hosts are created by thee alone, oh Lord.”¹⁴

¹⁰ Pancharatra, Act I, (Page 111)

¹¹ Isa Upanishad 1

¹² Balacaritam, Act I (Page 115)

¹³ Narayana sukta

¹⁴ Abhisheka Nataka, Act Vi

“Sa Brahma, Sa Shivah, Sa Harih Soksharah Paramah Svarat”¹⁵

“He, the supreme lord, is known by many names such as Brahma, Shiva and Hari”

In the Pratignayaugandharayana, Yaugandharaya says:

“For those that have stored up merit, death brings no regret.”¹⁶

श्रेयश्च प्रेयश्च मनुष्यमेतः

तौ सम्परीत्य विविनक्ति धीरः ।

श्रेयो हि धीरोऽभि प्रेयसो वृणीते

प्रेयो मन्दो योगक्षेमाद्वृणीते ॥ ॥ कठ उपनिषद् – 1.2.2 ॥

Translation:

The righteous and the pleasurable approach man.

The intelligent one examines both and separates them.

Yea, the intelligent one prefers the righteous to the pleasurable,

(whereas) the ignorant one selects the pleasurable

for the sake of yoga (attainment of that which is not already possessed)

and *kshema* (the preservation of that which is already in possession).¹⁷

In the VI Act of Svapnavasavadatta, the Chamberlain remarks:

Though Mahasena's daughter has passed away, she has not ceased to exist, while she is so mourned by her noble lord. But verily, whom can anyone protect in the hour of death? When the rope breaks, who can hold the pitcher? It is the same way for men and trees: now they grow, and anon they are cut down. (10)¹⁸

¹⁵ Narayana Sukta end

¹⁶ Pratignayaugandharayana, Act IV, (Page 31)

¹⁷ *Katha Upanishad* – 1.2.2

¹⁸ VI Act of Svapnavasavadatta

उत्तिष्ठत जाग्रत

प्राप्य वरान्निबोधत ।

क्षुरस्य धारा निशिता दुरत्यया

दुर्गं पथस्तत्कवयो वदन्ति ॥ कठ उपनिषद् – 1.3.14 ॥

Translation:

Arise, awake, and learn by approaching the exalted ones,
for that path is sharp as a razor's edge, impassable,
and hard to go by, say the wise.¹⁹

It may be concluded that Bhasa was a poet-dramatist who had first-hand exposure to the Vedic lore and the Upanishads. The Upanishadic thoughts have greatly enriched the plays of Bhasa. The philosophical touch has been provided by the message of the Upanishads in the works of Bhasa. It is worth a detailed volume to be written in this background, as Bhasa belonging to the legacy of the Upanishads.

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¹⁹ *Katha Upanishad – 1.3.14*

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