

# *Stage Craft in the Age of Kālidāsa*

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The seed of theatre in India seems to have been sown in the Ṛgvedic period, i.e. dawn of civilization. Some of the big *yajñas* continued for months together and people thronged in large number from distant quarters to have a glimpse of the grand event. The annexing activities like storytelling, demonstration, music or some performance were necessary to keep the visitors busy and enjoying. Such programmes certainly required some sort of enclosure and a platform; may be an open-air stage even of a small dimension. We, however, find no record of the exact form of this very early theatre. We then come across the term *raṅgavāṭa* in the *Aranyaparva* of *Mahābhārata*, which stands for an enclosed or a fenced area to be used as stage. But the word *vāṭa* does suggest that it was an open-air platform. The great grammarian Pāṇini, in his monumental work *Aṣṭādhyāyī* in the 5<sup>th</sup> century B.C., does refer to the practice of some sort of acting in the *Naṭasūtras* and also informs about such branches or schools as Kṛṣāśva and Śilālin continuing from the Vedic age. The second stage of evolution is the *raṅgamaṇḍapa* or *raṅgaśālā* which was a covered pavilion probably having four pillars on which a thatched roof was supported and it was open on three sides. Similar pavilion theatre is to be seen in the Rānīgumphā rock-cut cellas at Udaigiri near Bhuvaneshwar in Orissa. Some picture of pavilion also emerges in the sculptural renderings at Bharhut, Sanchi, Ajanta, Amaravati and Mathura, which are dated between 2<sup>nd</sup> century B.C. and 2<sup>nd</sup> century A.D.

While probing into the concept of theatre in the period of Kālidāsa, the great playwright of early India, we find ourselves at the crossroads for various reasons. Firstly, the scholars are not in a position to fix a definite age of the poet as they place him divergently between the 2<sup>nd</sup> century B.C. and 6<sup>th</sup> century A.D. The Aihole Inscription of Pulakesin-II of the 7<sup>th</sup> century is the first historical evidence to mention him. Unfortunately, except the famous work *Nāṭyaśāstra* of Bharatamuni, we have no other text, which highlights the details of stagecraft or formation of theatre.

The *Nāṭyaśāstra* is certainly an encyclopaedic work on different aspects of dramatic theory and has often been honoured as the *Pañcamaveda* like the *Mahābhārata*. Its merits have further been elaborated in the brilliant commentary of Abhinavagutpa, captioned as *Abhinavabhāratī*, authored in the 10<sup>th</sup> century A.D. The period of composition of *Nāṭyaśāstra* is again controversial and it ranges from the beginning of

the 2<sup>nd</sup> century B.C. to the end of the 2<sup>nd</sup> century A.D. Kālidāsa has to be dated in the post *Nāṭyaśāstra* era; and in such case, it appears safe to assume that the concept of theatre of the age of Kālidāsa was same as referred to by Bharatamuni. The scrutiny of his plays amply supports this stand, although we have somewhat later texts, like the *Viṣṇudharmottarapurāṇa*, which also contain stray but relevant material on the subject.

There were three types of theatre i.e. *vikṛṣṭa* (rectangular), *caturasra* (square) and *tryasra* (triangular). These were also respectively known as *jyeṣṭha* (large), *madhya* (medium) and *avara* (small). Abhinavagupta further explains that the *jyeṣṭha* theatre was to be used when gods were heroes, in case of kings *madhyama* theatre was used and when ordinary persons acted, the *avara* or small stage was tried. The dimensions of these theatres vary from authority to authority. It also depends on what specific mode of measurement we apply. The measuring unit is sometimes called *hasta* and sometimes *daṇḍa*. The size of *daṇḍa* is four times bigger than *hasta*. While placing order for stage manufacturing this *hasta* and *daṇḍa* formula has to be taken into account.

#### प्रमाणमेषां निर्दिष्टं हस्त-दण्ड-समाश्रयम्

The stagecraft often took notice of the type of play to be staged. The drama is denoted by the term *Rūpaka*, which had ten variations; but the important ones were *Nāṭaka*, i.e. mythical or historical theme and *Prakarāṇa*- a social play. The big play was called *Pūrṇa-Rūpaka* - full-fledged drama. In view of different types of dramas, the *Nāṭyaśāstra* also informs about five forms of theatre of *raṅgaśālā*, such as:

- A. विकृष्ट ज्येष्ठ 108 × 64 *hastas* = about 162' × 96'
- B. विकृष्ट मध्यम 64 × 32 *hastas* = about 96' × 48'
- C. चतुरस्र मध्यम 64 × 64 *hastas* = about 96' × 96'
- D. चतुरस्र अवर 32 × 32 *hastas* = about 48' × 48'
- E. त्र्यस्र still smaller

Generally, the second type of theatre, i.e. विकृष्ट मध्यम measuring about 96' × 48' was preferred for the plays written by the dramatists like Kālidāsa, as it met almost all requirements of big dramas. Half of its space was earmarked for audience or *prekṣā*. The other half was further divided into two parts each measuring 24' × 48' or 16 × 32 *hastas*. Of these the front portion functioned as stage called *raṅgapīṭha* and the back one was the greenroom or dressing room called *nepathyagrha*. These two components were separated by a screen having two doors on two opposite sides; one for entrance and other for exit of actors and actresses. The *raṅgapīṭha*, main acting area, was

sometimes provided with a *raṅgaśīrṣa*, the subsidiary acting area with a partition at the back with doors; and the musicians occupied the space between the doors. The stage opted by Bharata in the *Nāṭyaśāstra* and also suited for the plays of Kālidāsa was of modest size neither very large nor small. The critics should keep in mind the prevailing circumstances of ancient India when light and sound devices were not available and the convenience of spectators could not be ignored.

A term which sometimes finds a place in shaping the main acting area, *raṅgapīṭha* is *mattavāraṇī*, the exact nature and purpose of which, remains obscure and controversial. But in all probability, these must have been the side wings giving scope for prompter or *sūtradhāra* to remain concealed while assisting an actor.

Another controversial issue of the early stagecraft is the use of curtain. No doubt the fall and rise of curtain has been against the Indian conventions but we cannot altogether reject the idea of using the front curtain to mark the end of an Act, Moreover, there are some inter-connecting small events like introduction termed as प्रस्तावना, उपस्थापना or प्रवेशक for which the main acting area is not required and these can be acted by one or two actors before the front curtain, on apron area. The change of scene remains in progress unnoticed by the audience behind the front curtain. Such eventualities are often met with in the dramas of Kālidāsa. The small informative anecdotes are captioned as *Viṣkambhakas* and these could be acted at the stage apron.

The use of readymade cut out blocks called *pustas* for changing the scenes has been a long-standing practice and also recommended by the *Nāṭyaśāstra*. The idea of a river, mountain, sea, forest, grove, waterfalls, mansion, palace, market area, etc. can be shown rapidly through the cut out blocks. The plays of Kālidāsa, in which the nature plays a vital role and where the glimpses of *āśramas* are essential features, use of *pustas* or blocks becomes a necessity of a theatre. To make the scene more effective and realistic, even the mechanical devices could also be considered and such blocks were called *vyājimapustas*. The *Nāṭyaśāstra* is not averse to the idea of showing the living animals on the stage. This was, however, not in tune with refinement and delicacy, and symbolical representation was always favoured. Early Indian theatre, as also used in the time of Kālidāsa, was semi-realistic and semi-conventional. Undue or over exposition of theme was not appreciated by the highly cultured Kalidasian society.

In the light of discussion on the concept and form of early Indian theatre, let us analyse the plays of Kālidāsa. The stage, as discussed, was almost of the same dimension as prescribed by Bharatamuni; but in case of a big drama, the size must

have been larger. We are well aware of the fact that the great poet is remembered for his three plays, beside several poetic accomplishments. The three dramas are - (a) *Mālavikāgnimitram*, (b) *Vikramorvaśīyam* and (c) *Abhijñānaśākuntalam*.

The story of the first, i.e. *Mālavikāgnimitram* is a short one confined only in a few weeks; that of *Vikramorvaśīyam* several years and *Abhijñānaśākuntalam* covered a time span from three to four years. Similarly, the staging of the *Mālavikāgnimitram* is restricted to the royal palace and the pleasure garden and does not need frequent change of settings on the stage, but the other two plays are spread in several places and in different regions requiring frequent alterations of scenes through blocks or *pustas*. But a good number of *pustas* of one scene can be used in the other scene also and this reduces the dramatic complexity to some extent.

Since, it is not possible to analyse the theatrical aspects of all the three plays in this short communication, only the largest and the most famous work, i.e. the *Abhijñānaśākuntalam* is taken up here.

The *Nāndī* of *Śākuntalam* is itself an important verse displaying genius of Kālidāsa. On one hand, it remembers and pleases the eight forms of Śiva and on the other introduces the important actors in a very subtle style, that everybody cannot guess it. The *Nāndī* was certainly recited by *sūtradhāra* and then the *naṭī* entered. In their dialogue, the poet and his play are briefly introduced through a *Prastāvanā* and immediately king Duṣyanta appears at the stage chasing a deer. There is no break between the introduction and beginning of the first scene of Act-I. We must therefore assume that the *Nāndī* and *Prastāvanā* were performed before the front curtain at the apron of the stage and the scene showing Duṣyanta chasing deer was ready behind. The *sūtradhāra* and the audience are enjoying the music with deep appreciation :

तवास्मि गीत रागेण हरिणा प्रसभं हृतः।

But a sound is heard and the attention is immediately diverted by the motion of the chariot in which Duṣyanta is chasing a deer.

एष राजेव दुष्यन्तः सांरगेणातिरंहसा।।

With this announcement, the front curtain must have been raised and the play began. Thus, the use of apron stage for *Nāndī* and *Prastāvanā* and raising of curtain for showing king's hunting near the hermitage without loss of time are two remarkable steps of stagecraft of the age of Kālidāsa.

Act-I is played in the *āśrama* of the sage Kaṇva who himself has left for *Somatīrtha*, asking Śākuntalā to take charge of proper reception of guests and look

after the trees and plants of the *āśrama*. She is assisted by her two friends Anasūyā and Priyamvadā. The king watches the actions of the girls and later sits on a platform near the *saptaparṇa* tree for conversation. There should be no difficulty in presenting the set of *āśrama* with the help of cut out blocks - *pustas*.

The beginning of Act-II is staged in the forest where the retinue of king and nobleman are busy in hunting. The king's attention is diverted towards the *āśrama* and he orders to stop hunting and appreciates the beauty of Śakuntalā. The stage setting of Act-I can be used for Act-II also, with slight modifications. The events take place in forest and *āśrama* and conversation between *vidūṣaka*, *senāpati* and king is held at the platform (*vedikā*).

Act-III begins with a short communication, called *Viṣkambhaka*, through which a disciple of Kaṇva informs about the indifferent physical condition of Śakuntalā. This brief mono-acting could be arranged at the apron stage itself and the use of the main acting area was reserved for bigger scene in which Duṣyanta, Śakuntalā and her friends are to appear. The venue is the hermitage near the bank of river Mālinī. For creating this environment, the cut out blocks of the previous Acts can well be used. Both Duṣyanta and Śakuntalā are in love with each other. The former is keen to meet his beloved, but Śakuntalā's condition demands treatment, as she is not in a position to move. She is to be presented at the stage lying and attended by her two friends. The poet gives the stage direction also.

‘ततः प्रविशति यथोक्त-व्यापारा सह सखीभ्यां शकुन्तला’

The lying Śakuntalā cannot enter the stage. The scene requires the use of curtain and the direction of the poet is to be accepted only as the conventional one.

This Act is somewhat complicated, as different situations are to be projected on the same stage. Use of curtain for such scenes was avoided. Hiding of Duṣyanta, conversation between the three girls, private meeting of Duṣyanta and Śakuntalā in the grove, king's departure just before the arrival of Gautamī and his return to the lonely bower are the delicate episodes, which must be acted in more than one zones and setting of such stage requires a great skill.

Act-IV is again not an easy task of stage handling. The *Viṣkambhaka* at the beginning is a big one and conveys the anxiety of Anasūyā and Priyamvadā about the future of Śakuntalā. This is further aggravated by the curse of Ḍurvāsā, to be heard from the *nepathya* (greenroom). This interlude, being important and large, may not be acted on the apron stage. Moreover, it is not linked with the next episode and the time-

gap is not a problem. We presume that the *raṅgapīṭha* itself was used for acting. Secondly, if the curse of Durvāsā is to be heard from *nepathya*, the *Viṣkambhaka* has to be enacted in main acting area, as from apron stage the voice of curse may not be clearly audible to the girls. The use of the *raṅgapīṭha* for this *Viṣkambhaka* is further supported by the fact that in the main Act, when the disciple of Kaṇva leaves after guessing time and before entrance of Anasūyā, the direction by the poet is प्रविश्यापटीक्षेपेण, i.e. the scene is to be continued without the fall of curtain. We are, therefore, justified to think that the curtain had already fallen after the *Viṣkambhaka* and at the entrance of Anasūyā, was in continuity of the main scene. The remaining part of Act-IV is enacted in the *āśrama*, where the main event is the farewell of Śakuntalā. There seems no difficulty in arranging stage with the availability of the cut out blocks already used. Some of the actions are to be shown through gestures only as directed by the poet like प्रियंवदा नाट्येन सुमनसो गृह्णाति and later in decorating Śakuntalā उभे नाट्येनालंकुरुतः।

Act-V begins in the palace with the conversation between the jester and king who listens to a melodious song from distance. The tired and exhausted king is elated by the bards and informed of the arrival of a party from the hermitage of Kaṇva. The king fails to recall his relation with Śakuntalā due to Durvāsā's curse and the ring gifted to Śakuntalā was also lost. The fireplace (अग्निशरण गृह) where the party from *āśrama* is first received and later at the king's balcony (अलिन्द) are the two venues. The first may match the fireplace of *āśrama*, but king's balcony is an addition. Proper entry and exit of the party of visitors is also to be ensured as per royal traditions.

Act-VI starts with a *Praveśaka*, an interlude, which is enacted by five persons near the gate of palace. This informs about the recovery of the missing ring of Śakuntalā from a fisherman. Presenting the lower strata of the society, the scene is important as it maintains the connecting link. It is quite interesting, being full of fun and laughter to be rejoiced by the general audience. The question arises whether this event comprising five persons can be acted at the apron stage like the other *Viṣkambhakas*. If so, the size of apron has to be bigger and in this case the entire stage of the theatre must be of larger dimensions than suggested by the *Nāṭyaśāstra* for विकृष्ट मध्यम theatre, which otherwise suited plays of Kālidāsa. Alternatively, the scene has to be enacted on the main acting area रंगपीठ with the rise and fall of the front curtain.

The Act then begins with the entrance of nymph Sānumatī in an aerial car and this must have been possible through hand gestures and bodily movement. She, however, remains unnoticed by others. The two maidservants prepare for worship of

spring, but are restrained by the angry *kañcukī* who enters the stage through a curtain or screen. The direction of the poet is प्रविश्यापटी-क्षेपेण कुपितः। This indicates that some small and handy screens were used for presenting the sudden appearance of a person on the stage. This appearance may be possible through the side-wing called *mattavāraṇī*. There is a long conversation between the king and jester, and the former often recollects his company with Śakuntalā in the *āśrama* of Kaṇva. This has been possible after the recovery of the ring. Śānumatī secretly listens to the conversation. The Act ends with entry of Mātali, messenger of Indra and both depart in the chariot brought by Mātali. There seems no problem in the presentation of scenes from the stagecraftship.

The VII<sup>th</sup> and the last Act is somewhat difficult as the events take shape in a region above earth. Duṣyanta descends from heaven in an aerial chariot handled by Mātali. It flies in sky; still the horses have been mentioned. From the point of view of presentation on stage, the poet probably intended to show horse-yoked chariot and flying speed and movements were to be grasped through dancing postures and hand gestures. We are met with a detailed description of such acting in the *Nāṭyaśāstra*. Similarly, different levels or zones of sky can be managed through blue shades on screen and staircases. For the *āśrama* of Mārīca, the blocks of the *āśrama* of Kaṇva could be used; of course, the rocky lands has to be shown with the help of some more *pustas*, blocks. The trees, bushes, groves may be same as used earlier. The Act terminates with the happy meeting of Duṣyanta with Śakuntalā and son Bharata with the blessings of sage Mārīca.

The concept of theatre in the period of Kālidāsa was almost same as prescribed by Bharatamuni in his famous work *Nāṭyaśāstra*. At the same time, some modifications were effected as per situation and practicability. In such cases, the poet gave some directions in the text. The *Abhijñānaśākuntalam*, although the best but largest play of Kālidāsa, should pose no difficulty in presenting at the stage.