



P E N G U I N



C L A S S I C S

BHASA

The Shattered Thigh and Other Plays



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The Shattered Thigh
And Other Plays

Translated from the original Sanskrit with an Introduction by
A.N.D. HAKSAR



PENGUIN BOOKS

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THE SHATTERED THIGH

BHASA is a celebrated name in classical Sanskrit drama. Although his dates have not been conclusively established, it is certain that he preceded Kalidasa, who has praised him by name in the prologue of one of his own plays. It has been suggested that Bhasa lived in the Mauryan period, the fourth or the third century BC, but most scholarly opinion places him in the first or the second century AD.

Bhasa's plays were lost over a period of time but thirteen were rediscovered in Kerala at the beginning of the twentieth century. Of these six, forming the present collection, are based on the *Māhābhārata* story which Bhasa embellished for obtaining dramatic effects. The remaining seven are derived from the *Rāmāyana*, the *Harivamśa* and legends and stories prevalent at the time.

Bhasa wrote in a period which was politically, socially, economically and most importantly, culturally dynamic. Theatre was already an established art form and the foremost treatise on fine arts, Bharata's *Nāṭyaśāstra*, was written in the same period. Plays were written and performed by professionals supported by other well-developed aspects of stagecraft.

For over fifteen hundred years classical Indian commentators and anthologists have counted Bhasa among the foremost writers of ancient India. He made use of the Sanskrit language in a simpler form as compared to the more ornate style of later playwrights. He dispensed with the opening benediction or *nāṇḁi* and began his plays directly with the stage direction. And, most importantly, he broke with convention by giving a tragic ending to one of his plays, *Urubhangam* with the death of the hero on stage.

ADITYA NARAYANA DHAIRYASHEEL HAKSAR was born in Gwalior and educated at the Doon School and the universities of Allahabad and Oxford. A well-known translator of Sanskrit classics, he has also had a distinguished career as a diplomat, serving as Indian high commissioner to Kenya and the Seychelles, minister to the United

States, and ambassador to Portugal and Yugoslavia. Haksar's translations from the Sanskrit include *Hitopadesa*, *Simhasana Dvatrimsika*, *Tales of the Ten Princes* and *Subhashitavali*, all published as Penguin Classics. He has also compiled *A Treasury of Sanskrit Poetry*.

*For
B.
with love
on her birthday*

Introduction to the New Edition

An eminent contemporary scholar of Sanskrit literature has expressed the view that Bhasa's plays, with their comparative brevity, rapid incident-filled action and dramatic changes, 'seem to have an eye to the stage rather than to a reader.'^{*} A well known modern playwright says that 'every line in these texts isactable ... the gesture behind each word is clearly visible even on the printed page.'[†]

Without detracting in any way from the readability of Bhasa's work, these comments on its actability are particularly applicable to the *Mahābhārata* plays of this great dramatist of ancient India. Part of the living *Kutiyattam* tradition of Kerala, included in the syllabus of the National School of Drama, Bhasa has been produced in various Indian languages and also in the original Sanskrit. Records of production in English are scanty, but plays from the present translation have been reported[§] as staged and lauded since their first publication more than a decade ago.

The credit for bringing out this new edition goes to Ravi Singh, Publisher and Editor-in-Chief of Penguin India. My thanks to him, and to R. Sivapriya and Paromita Mohanchandra for the consequential practical arrangements. This has also given me the opportunity to make a few corrections.

Noida
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A.N.D.H

Introduction

Bhasa is a celebrated name in classical Sanskrit literature. The figure best known today from what remains of that literature, which once pervaded the entire South Asian subcontinent and beyond, is of course Kalidasa. In the prologue of his play, *Mālavikāgnimitram*, that great poet and dramatist of ancient India poses the following question: ‘How can the work of the modern poet Kalidasa be more esteemed than the works of Bhasa, Kaviputra, Saumillaka and others of established fame?’¹ An impeccable answer follows in the next line: ‘Everything is not praiseworthy, just because it is old; nor should a poetical work be dismissed just because it is new.’ But this brief dialogue makes it clear that Bhasa was already well known on the Indian literary scene over fifteen hundred years ago, when Kalidasa had just begun to make his mark.

Two hundred years later, the classical period was in its last phase. Bhasa remained well known across the country. In North India, Bana Bhatta, the first Sanskrit novelist and the court-poet of King Harsha in seventh century Kanauj, has this to say in his biography of the king, *Harshacharita*: ‘Bhasa earned fame by his plays which commenced with the producer, had many roles, and were (grand) like temples with banners.’² And in South India, Dandin, the critic and prose stylist from Kanchi of the same century, writes in his *Avantisundarikathā* that even though departed, Bhasa lives on, embodied in his plays with their craftsmanship.

Six hundred years nearer the present time, Bhasa, Kalidasa and Bana are included in an oft-quoted tribute to poets of yore by Jayadeva in his thirteenth century work, *Prasanna Rāghava*. ‘Who will not delight in the Muse of Poetry,’ asks the writer, ‘the lovely maid whose laughter is Bhasa, the guru of poets, whose sport of pleasure is Kalidasa, whose Cupid is Bana ...?’³

Bhasa is also mentioned in other medieval works: in Vakpatiraja’s eighth century Prakrit poem *Gauda Vaho*; in the Sanskrit literary critiques, Rajasekhara’s *Kāvya Mimāmsa* and Ramachandra’s *Nātya Darpana*, of the tenth

and twelfth centuries respectively; and in the verse anthologies *Sūktimuktāvali*, *Śārṅgadhara Paddhati* and *Subhāshitāvali*, compiled respectively in Maharashtra, Rajasthan and Kashmir in the thirteenth, fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. In the second of these, in a stanza ascribed to the famous tenth century critic Rajasekhara, Bhasa heads a list of sixteen ancient writers, including names like Kalidasa and Bharavi, who had mastered the Goddess of Speech.⁴ In the first anthology a quotation from the same critic names and lauds one of Bhasa's plays.⁵

The three anthologies also contain some stanzas attributed to Bhasa, though discrepancies put most attributions in doubt. But at least two stanzas are shown as Bhasa's in two anthologies. One describes in a conventional didactic mode the season at the end of the rains:

The sun burns sharply, base but brief,
The deer shed horns, the ungrateful drop friends,
Water pleases, like sages the wise,
And mud starts drying up, like lust in poverty.⁶

The other verse is an unusual variation on a traditional subject:

This mad moonlight turns the whole world's head:
The cat licks it in the cup like milk;
The elephant grasps at its beams through the branches
Mistaking them for tender shoots;
And on the bed it seems a silken sheet
To the maiden at love's end.⁷

But the fame of Bhasa clearly rests at present on his plays.

The plays of Bhasa were lost over the course of time. A hundred years ago the text of not a single one of them was available, even though the name of Bhasa had long been esteemed through references in the works of other writers for more than a thousand years. The credit for the rediscovery of his work, it is now accepted, goes to Mahamahopadhyaya T. Ganapati Sastri of Trivandrum. In 1909 this scholar found a palm leaf manuscript containing Sanskrit texts, written in Malayalam characters, of a play evidently composed by Bhasa. The

qualification has been added as the author's name did not appear in any of the texts. The authorship had to be inferred from a variety of external and internal evidence. Sastri's researches led to the discovery of other manuscripts, and eventually he recovered thirteen plays which he ascribed to Bhasa and published critically in the Trivandrum Sanskrit Series.⁸

Not unexpectedly, this discovery also resulted in a scholarly controversy about the attribution which has yet to be fully set at rest. This may never happen as the paucity of comprehensive evidence, resulting in different interpretations, remains a feature of ancient Indian historiography. But the prevailing, though not unanimous, scholarly opinion now regards the thirteen plays as the works of Bhasa, and among the earliest examples of Sanskrit drama now available.⁹

Six of these plays are based on the epic *Mahābhārata* story, and presented here in translation. The remaining seven are: *Abhisheka*, *Pratimā*, *Bālacharita*, *Svapna Vāsavadattā*, *Pratijnā Yaugandharāyana*, *Chārudatta* and *Avimāraka*. The plots of the first two of these are drawn from the other Indian epic, the *Rāmāyana*; of the next from the Krishna stories in the *Harivamśa*; of the next two from the legends about King Udayana; and of the last two from other stories prevalent at the time.

This extant *oeuvre* of Bhasa has been the subject of a certain amount of scholarly research and critical analysis since its discovery.¹⁰ A learned translation into English was made over sixty years ago¹¹ at the Punjab University. A few of Bhasa's plays have been staged in recent times, both in the original and in translation. But Bhasa's name is still better known than his works, their times, and the contemporary literary and cultural environment. Bhasa himself, the man, is yet to emerge from the shadows of history.

The dating of ancient Indian events and figures is rarely an easy process, and often results in numerous theories. It is clear that Bhasa preceded Kalidasa, in whose time the former's plays had already 'established fame'. It has been suggested that Bhasa lived in the Mauryan period, the fourth or the third century BC, as a verse from one of his plays figures in Kautilya's *Arthaśāstra*.¹² But in general, scholarly opinion places him in the first or the second century AD. Ashvaghosha, the biographer of the Buddha and also a noted dramatist, may have lived earlier. But only fragments of one of his plays, the *Sāriputra Prakarana*, have been found in Central Asia. Two satirical monologues by Vararuchi and Isvaradatta are also dated to Bhasa's time or a little earlier.

Though this literary form is recognized in classical Indian dramaturgy, it cannot of course be described as a play in the fullest sense. Thus, Bhasa is at present the earliest of the classical Sanskrit dramatists whose plays have come down to us intact.

In historical terms, the time of Bhasa lies between the end of the Mauryan empire and the advent of the Gupta age. It was a period when a number of kingdoms and principalities flourished in India, some of them of considerable size and importance. The Andhra kingdom of the Satavahanas had arisen in the Deccan. The Kushanas were established in the north-west under the famous Kanishka. The Sakas ruled in the west, and the era named after them, which is still in use, had just commenced. The Cheras controlled the south, and in the east the golden age of Kharavela in Kalinga was a recent memory. In the Gangetic Plain, Bhasa's own reference to the land between the Himalayas and the Vindhya being under single rule upto the sea, points to the existence of a substantial state.

While this may have been a time of political plurality in the country, it also seems to have been a period of comparative social peace, of increasing economic prosperity and cultural unity, and of wider contacts abroad. Trade had increased, both internally and overseas. Indian merchandise and culture circulated more, not only within the country but also to South-East Asia, the Far East and the Mediterranean. By the middle of the first century Buddhism had reached China, and by the end of that century the Roman Emperor Trajan was receiving an Indian mission in Europe. Internally, mercantile and professional guilds had become wealthy and were providing patronage to learning and the arts. According to a scholarly chronology,¹³ the century of Bhasa was also the time of the physician Charaka, the age of the development of Gandhara art, and the period when the Code of Manu assumed its final form.

The cultural achievements mentioned above naturally presuppose a long period of earlier development. The rise of Jainism and Buddhism in India, and subsequently of *bhakti* in its early form, all predate Bhasa by several centuries, not to speak of the much more ancient period of the Vedas and the Upanishads. By the time of Bhasa, Panini's Sanskrit grammar had long been composed, as also Patanjali's famous commentary on it. The Buddhist *Tripitaka* in Pali had also been written. The epic tales of the *Mahābhārata* and the *Rāmāyana* had already become a part of the Indian psyche. The cave temple of Karli and the earlier ones at Ajanta had also been constructed by this period. Nearer the time of Bhasa, Buddhism bifurcated between Mahayana and Hinayana at the great

Council summoned by Kanishka. This was also a period of revival of the *sanātana dharma* in India. It is in the background of this rich panorama of past growth and continued creativity of a still vigorous culture that Bhasa's plays were written.

The works which have come down to the present from the literature of this period include the Buddha's biography in verse, *Buddhacharita*, and the epic poem *Saundarananda* by Ashvaghosha, the *Rāmāyana*-based play *Kundamālā* by Dinnaga or Dhiranga, and the Buddhist hymns of Matricheta and Nagarjuna, apart from technical treatises like the *Charaka Samhitā* on medicine, and the *Arthasāstra* on politics. But it is to the Bharata *Nātyasāstra*¹⁴ that one must turn to acquire a sense of the professional environment in which Bhasa's plays were written and performed. The *Nātyasāstra* itself is traced to the first or the second century, a period contemporaneous with that of Bhasa. It is the oldest work of Indian fine arts and literary criticism now available, and deals mainly with dramatic representation. It is not a scripture of dance and drama, although it came to be so regarded at a later stage, but rather a compilation of theatrical practices as they had developed over previous centuries, and a theoretical analysis on the basis of these practices. Theories of Sanskrit poetics and literary aesthetics were elaborated further in the works of later critics like Bhamah and Udbhata, Ananda Vardhana, Abhinavagupta and Dhananjaya, between the fifth and tenth centuries. But Bhasa predates them all, and his work, though reflecting to a large extent the canon set down in the *Nātyasāstra*, follows it less closely than Kalidasa and later dramatists.

The theatre was already a flourishing art form in India in the time of Bhasa and the *Nātyasāstra*. It had evolved beyond recitals of epic dialogues by hereditary bards. Plays were written and performed often accompanied by music and dance. There were professional producers, actors and actresses, drama teachers and dance instructors. Costumes, make-up, and other aspects of stagecraft were well developed. Performances took place in palaces, in temples and in halls built for the purpose. The *Nātyasāstra* suggests dimensions of theatre halls for as many as five hundred people, measures for their ventilation, and arrangements for seating the audience. The hall consisted of an auditorium, and a podium with a backstage. In between, a curtain was put up for entries and exits by the players. The similarity between the Sanskrit word for this stage curtain, 'yavanikā', and for Greek in general 'yavana', had led some scholars to

assume Greek influence on Indian drama in ancient times. But others have concluded that the origin of the two art forms is independent of each other, as their spirits and techniques are quite different. Philologically also, it has been pointed out, that the word for curtain derives from a root pertaining to binding and ropes rather than a Greek connection.¹⁵

The *Nāṭyaśāstra* categorizes ten different types of dramatic performances, depending on their theme, length, plot and characters. At one end of this spectrum were the *nāṭaka* and the *prakarana*, full length plays with five to ten acts, and plots drawn from the epics, history or fiction. At the other end were satirical monologues or *bhanas*. In between there were heroic, tragic or comic plays of one to four acts, and archaic plays about gods and demons. Bhasa's works cover many of these categories. But the translations presented in this collection are, with two exceptions, one-act plays mainly of the types *anka* and *vyāyoga*, evoking respectively the tragic or the heroic flavour.

It would be appropriate at this point to outline briefly the theory of flavour or *rasa* which formed an important and perhaps unique part of ancient Indian poetics. *Rasa* is commonly, but inexactly, also translated as sentiment. Much has been written about it from the classical period onwards. To put it simply, drama is an imitation of life, and specially of emotions, or *bhāva*, which the dramatist shows his characters as experiencing. The audience in turn experiences, not the actual emotion, but an aesthetic appreciation of its *rasa* or flavour. The distinction, apparently subtle, would be clear from the phrase 'to enjoy watching a tragedy'. The skill of the artist lies not only in portraying the emotion on the stage, but also in invoking its flavour in the audience. A cultivated person, able to appreciate a *rasa* with discrimination, was known as a *rasika*.

The *Nāṭyaśāstra* categorizes eight basic emotions: love (*rati*) humour (*hāsa*), enthusiasm (*utsāha*), anger (*krodha*), fear (*bhaya*), grief (*śoka*), disgust (*jugupsa*), and astonishment (*vismaya*). The corresponding flavours are the erotic (*śringāra*), comic (*hāsya*), heroic (*vīra*), furious (*raudra*), apprehensive (*bhayānaka*), compassionate (*karuna*), horrific (*vībhatsa*), and marvellous (*adbhuta*). At a later time, the emotion of tranquillity and the flavour of calm were added to this list.

Each artistic work was expected to evoke a single predominant flavour. But combinations with other *rasas* were permissible, within certain rules, to enhance the aesthetic effect. Dissection of classical literary works to identify and appraise such combinations was a common activity among scholars and critics. Bhasa combines flavours in his own subtle way. He also evokes new moods, like family affection and comradeship, pride and wilfulness, cunning and guile.

Classical Sanskrit drama had developed certain conventions by the time of Bhasa. Most plays began with a *nāndi* or benediction followed by a prologue, the *prastāvanā* or *sthāpanā*, in which the producer or stage director, called the *sutradhāra*, appeared on the stage with one or more assistants and introduced the play and often the playwright. In most cases the plays also ended with a benediction or *bharata vākya*, generally pronounced by the *sutradhāra*. Between the prologue and the first act, or between the subsequent acts, it was not uncommon to have interludes, called *vishkambhaka* or *praveśaka*, during which the action of the plot was advanced through dialogue between minor characters. Journeys, wars, deaths, and common acts like eating were not represented on the stage, but indicated through such interludes, which even occurred in one-act plays.

The convention about the use of language was that while the more exalted, specially male, characters spoke in classical Sanskrit, the others, and almost all women spoke in the vernacular Prakrit. Scholars believe this to be a reflection of actual life at that time. In later centuries, of course, as Sanskrit became more stylized and artificial, its drama gradually became essentially a court art. But in Bhasa's time it was still an art form with a wider appeal, and his language is comparatively simple and natural.

An important convention, which distinguishes ancient Sanskrit from Greek drama, was the absence in the former of tragic endings and depictions of the hero's death. Several Sanskrit plays have tragic themes or sequences evoking grief, pathos and compassion. But the endings are always auspicious. Learned explanations have been offered for the absence of tragedy in Sanskrit drama, relating it to the philosophy and ethos of India. A straightforward explanation is to be found in a verse from the *Nāṭyaśāstra* itself: 'Drama is meant for the recreation of the people, of the tired, the miserable, and those in pain and in grief.'¹⁶ Tragic endings could have little place in a recreational activity. From this perspective, as also from that of its descriptions of plot and characterization, it is interesting to reflect upon the extent to which the dicta of the *Nāṭyaśāstra* can still be traced in that modern form of mass recreation, the Indian cinema.

The construction of a dramatic plot, with its beginning, middle and end, was elaborated in greater detail in the *Nāṭyaśāstra*. The action of the classic play, passed conventionally through five stages or *avasthā*: start of action; progress; further progress but emergence of difficulties; near-success clouded by obstacles and final attainment. In a full-length play, each *avasthā* could consist of several dramatic situations showing the characters in action. The story was presented in

one or more acts, each encompassing self-contained action within the duration of a day. The acts could be linked by interludes but were not divided into scenes. The plot and characters were drawn mainly from the deeds of legendary or historical heroes, but they also dealt with contemporary life, both élite and ordinary. According to the *Nāṭyaśāstra*, both the hero and plot should be well-known. Nobility and self-possession were the expected traits of all types of heroes who were otherwise categorized as calm, gay, proud or magnanimous. The categorization of heroines was much more elaborate: maidenly or mature; with or without a husband; awaiting the lover or going for a tryst. There were at least eight types of heroines in literature with many permutations and subdivisions. The supporting cast included villains, jesters, companions and other stock characters. An important character was the *sutradhāra*, literally the string-holder, like a puppeteer, who introduced the play as its producer and director, and occasionally acted as standby in other roles. In the prologue of one of the plays included in this collection, *Dūta Ghatotkacham*, Bhasa describes the cosmic drama of the universe, directed from its beginning to the final curtain, by a divine *sutradhāra*.

The Sanskrit play had short but clear stage directions for all actions from entrance to exit. Action proceeded through dialogue, asides, soliloquy and imaginary dialogue. It seems there were not many stage props or accessories. In most cases they were evoked through dialogue and gestures. Song and dance were often included. This was the theatrical craft of Bhasa's days.

As already mentioned, Bhasa's work is marked by some interesting departures from the conventions described in the *Nāṭyaśāstra*. First, he dispenses with the opening benediction or *nāṇḍi*. None of the plays in the present collection have this exordium, but begin in each case with the stage direction, 'after the *nāṇḍi*, enter the *sutradhāra*'. This distinctive feature was remarked upon as long ago as the time of Bana Bhatta who had noted that Bhasa's producer does pronounce a benediction in his own first words. Interestingly, his subsequent remarks are more or less identical in all these plays.

The closing benediction is also absent in some of the plays in this collection. The five stages of dramatic development are difficult to trace in most cases, but this may be due to the compactness of the plots and the pace of action in the one-act plays. But Bhasa's most noteworthy breach of convention lies in giving a tragic ending in one play with the hero's death on stage.

The play *Urubhangam* ends with the death of the hero, Duryodhana, who has earlier been vanquished in battle and humiliated. It is a powerful tragedy in modern terms, and perhaps explicable conventionally only if the hero's end is regarded as his ascent to heaven. Three other plays, *Dūta Vākyam*, *Dūta Ghatotkacham* and *Karnabhāram* have strong evocations of oncoming tragedy and doom, though they do not actually end with death. In all four, Bhasa has devised a form of dramatic presentation of which there are no other examples in classical Sanskrit literature.

Bhasa's characterizations are in keeping with convention. The most interesting character in his plays, based on the *Mahābhārata*, is without doubt Duryodhana. This principal villain of the actual epic is presented in four of these plays as the *dhīroddhata* type of hero, proud and haughty, wilful and defiant, but withal noble and self-possessed. Courage, magnanimity and piety are other qualities with which Bhasa invests Duryodhana who is also shown as a devoted son, a loving father, a good friend and a man both royal and loyal. Other characters brought to life in the plays are Duryodhana's father, the old blind king Dhritarashtra, his cunning uncle, Shakuni, and his chief adversaries, the three Pandava princes. His friend Karna is the noble, tragic hero of the play *Karnabhāram*. His protagonist in another play, *Dūta Vākyam*, is Krishna, depicted with an enigmatic mix of both human and divine attributes. But the sense of Krishna's divinity is present in the other plays also.

In view of the deity invoked at the beginning of his plays it has been suggested that Bhasa was a devotee of the god Vishnu, and a follower of the Bhagavata cult.¹⁷ The opening lines of the plays in the present collection address Vishnu by some of his well-known traditional appellations like Narayana, Hari, Sridhara, Upendra and Kesava. The last is clearly identified with Krishna. The doctrine of the incarnations of Vishnu seems to have been well-established by Bhasa's time. Apart from Rama and Krishna, there is mention in Bhasa's invocations of Narasimha, the god's incarnation as man-lion, and of the three strides with which the dwarf incarnation, Vamana, bestrode the universe. The plays depict a time of orthodox religious rituals and practices like fire sacrifices and the ceremonial use of water in making vows and incantations. The society portrayed in them already had the main elements of the caste hierarchy. The principal characters in Bhasa's plays, based on the *Mahābhārata*, are drawn almost entirely from the priestly and the warrior castes. The former expected and received respect and regard from the others. The warrior caste had a recognized code of chivalry and honour. But Bhasa's characters are not caste stereotypes. Their

individuality and human reality is apparent even in minor characters like soldiers, chamberlains and cowherds.

Before considering the plays based on the *Mahābhārata* which are featured in the present collection, a brief reference to the other seven plays of Bhasa would be in order.¹⁸ The most acclaimed of these is *Svapna Vāsavadattā*, in six acts, based on the legend of the gallant king Udayana, his wives the beloved Vasavadatta and the beautiful Padmavati, and his wise and loyal minister, Yaugandharayana. The play derives its name from a central episode in which the king dreams of the queen he thinks is dead. Its companion play *Pratijnā Yaugandharāyana* tells the earlier story of the king's romance with Vasavadatta. Udayana is a historical figure and a contemporary of the Buddha. There are many legends about his adventures.

Chārudatta is named after the hero with whom the courtesan Vasantasena falls in love. The story, with its supporting cast of scoundrels and jesters, is refashioned and continued in the better known *Mrichhakatika* of Sudraka written a century later. It is a story based on fiction, as is that of *Avimārika*, another six act play about mistaken identity and magic. The final benedictory verse is the same as in *Pratijnā*.

The two plays drawn from the *Rāmāyana*, *Pratimā* and *Abhisheka*, are long, seven and six acts respectively, and deal with Rama's exile in the forest, the abduction and rescue of his wife, and his eventual return to his capital. The first derives its name from an episode involving the statue of the hero's father, and the second from his own final consecration, and that of his ally, the monkey-king, Sugriva, with which the play begins. In both, the playwright includes some episodes not to be found in the original epic.

An important difference is that in the first play Rama has a human characterization, while in the second he is definitely identified with the god Vishnu. The second play also depicts death on stage, the killing of the monkey-king's brother by Rama. This unconventional feature is also present in *Bālācharita*, which describes the adventures of Krishna as a boy, culminating in his slaying of the villain-king Kamsa. The epilogue of this play is identical with that of *Svapna Vāsavadattā* and *Dūta Vākyaṃ*, referring to a vast kingdom in the Gangetic Plain.

The six *Mahābhārata* plays have certain common characteristics which give them a measure of unity, and set them apart as a group by itself. To begin with,

they are inspired by the same great epic and the same epic characters appear or are mentioned in all of them. Something of the ruggedness of that tale of war also seems to have permeated these plays. The gay and delicate erotic flavour, so beloved of Sanskrit dramatists, is totally absent in them. But their most interesting feature is perhaps their nearness to the modern idiom. They are comparatively short and fast paced. The drama unfolds rapidly, the dialogue is often terse. The literary embellishments, so profuse in later classical authors, are used with relative restraint. The evocation of impending doom also has a modern ring. To vivify his characters and obtain dramatic effects, Bhasa often departs from the epic into episodes of his own creation. One play, *Pancharātram* indeed ends with an imminent peace between the warring sides.

Each play is built around a particular point or sequence in the narrative of the epic story, as it moves inexorably from dispute to war to destruction. In terms of this movement, the first play is *Madhyama Vyāyoga* in which the Pandava princes, the heroes of the epic, are in enforced exile following the machinations of their cousins and enemies, the Kauravas. Then comes *Pancharātram*, in which the exile draws to an end and tensions seem to subside. It is followed by *Dūta Vākya* in which a peaceful solution is attempted, but fails. In the next play, *Dūta Ghatotkacham*, the war has already commenced, and now passes the point of no return. There follows *Karnabhāram*, with premonitions of the defeat of the Kauravas. The final battle takes place in *Urubhangam*, with the death of the Kaurava leader.

To place these plays in their complete perspective, it is useful to have an overview of the epic's main narrative as a whole. The *Mahābhārta* plays were, of course, written for audiences fully familiar with the stories of the epic and with the main characters participating in them. Without this familiarity it is not possible to understand all the references or to savour the *rasa* in full, even though there are dramatic scenes which stand on their own. Many readers would already be familiar in greater or lesser detail with the *Mahābhārata* which has, in recent years, reached a larger and more international audience through the media of television, film and theatre. The following paragraphs are, as such, intended mainly for other readers who do not have this familiarity. The very brief summary contained in them gives essentially the background of the six plays under consideration here.¹⁹

One may begin with the common ancestor of the warring sides, Vichitravirya of

the Kuru dynasty. He was the king of Hastinapura, which is near Delhi, the present capital of India. This personage became king, as his elder half-brother, the noble Bhishma, had renounced the throne and taken a vow of life-long celibacy for reasons which are another story in the epic. Vichitravirya died while still young, and the sons of his two wives were brought up under Bhishma's care. As the elder boy, Dhritarashtra, was blind from birth, his younger half-brother, Pandu was consecrated king in due course. Then Pandu died and Dhritarashtra became the king.

Pandu had five sons who bore the patronymic Pandava. Dhritarashtra had one hundred sons who were known by the dynastic name Kaurava. The eldest of the one-hundred-and-five cousins was Pandu's firstborn, Yudhishtira. However, his right to the throne was contested by Dhritarashtra's eldest son, Duryodhana.

As the main narrative commences, a blind king is on the throne while his sons and nephews, now on the threshold of manhood, dispute the succession. The kingdom is guarded by the now venerable Bhishma who has engaged a famous teacher, Drona, for his grand-nephews. The Pandava princes are brilliant: Yudhishtira in wisdom, Bhima in strength, Arjuna in archery. The Kauravas are envious. But Duryodhana wins the friendship of Karna, a superb warrior of apparently humble origin but, unknown to himself and to everyone else, the illegitimate son of Pandu's wife, Kunti, and so the eldest brother of the Pandavas.

A conspiracy by Duryodhana to have them murdered forces the Pandavas to flee and eventually take refuge in the neighbouring kingdom of Panchala. There, in the sole instance of polyandry in the epic, they all marry Draupadi, the daughter of the local king. Fortified with this alliance, they return to Hastinapura. In a compromise, a portion of the ancestral kingdom is set aside for them and Yudhishtira becomes an independent king. His new kingdom prospers and is further strengthened by another matrimonial alliance, between the third Pandava prince Arjuna, and the sister of the Yadava chief Krishna who is also a cousin from their mother's side. Yudhishtira performs a royal sacrificial ceremony and assumes imperial prerogatives. He is universally acclaimed as a righteous ruler.

The Kauravas had also attended the Pandava sacrifice, to which they had been invited despite past enmity. The magnificence of the ceremony and the splendour of the Pandava court filled them with envy and made them feel belittled. To hurt pride was added rage, when on this occasion Draupadi ridiculed and insulted Duryodhana who had also been an aspirant for her hand.

at one time. He and his brothers returned to Hastinapura, determined to settle scores with the Pandavas in some way.

Duryodhana had an evil genius in his maternal uncle Shakuni who was also an expert gamesman with dice. With his encouragement, King Yudhishtira was invited to Hastinapura for a gambling match, an invitation he could not refuse both because of the requirements of the code of chivalry, and his own weakness for the game of dice. At the game Shakuni, playing on behalf of his nephew, cheated and won. Yudhishtira staked in turn, his wealth, his kingdom, his brothers, and then himself, but lost them all, in throw after throw.

Finally, Yudhishtira was induced to stake the Pandavas' common queen Draupadi, and lost her too. As the Pandavas watched in shame and anger, she was dragged into the gaming hall on Duryodhana's orders. There she was publicly humiliated. Karna called her a harlot. Duryodhana bared his thigh and beckoned her to sit on it. His brother attempted to strip her naked. Draupadi reacted with great spirit, questioning her husband's right to stake her when he had already lost himself and was no longer a free agent, and appealing to the shocked Kaurava elders. Sensing that the match had gone too far, the blind king ordered a replay, with the wager that the losing side would go into exile for twelve years, followed by one year's exile in hiding when, should they be discovered, the twelve years would be repeated again. Shakuni won this last stake also, and the Pandavas were forced into exile.

The Kauravas attempted to harass the Pandavas in this trying time, but were ignominiously rebuffed. The Pandavas had many adventures during their exile. Arjuna succeeded in his search for celestial weapons which made him invincible. Eventually the twelve years drew to an end and the Pandavas prepared to go into hiding for the final phase of the exile.

They disguised themselves and entered the service of King Virata. Yudhishtira became the king's companion and gaming partner. Bhima became the royal cook. Arjuna, masquerading as a eunuch, became the dance instructor of the king's daughter. The two younger Pandavas were appointed respectively as a groom and a cowherd. Draupadi was employed as the maid of Virata's queen. But their troubles had not yet ended. The queen's powerful brother became infatuated with Draupadi. His overtures became so excessive that Bhima was secretly obliged to murder him and his associates. The news of this event spread far. It reached the Kauravas who had been searching for their hidden adversaries and they suspected it may lead them to a discovery. Consequently they mounted a probing expedition against King Virata, ostensibly to seize his cattle.

When the news of this attack reached Virata's capital, he and his army were engaged on another frontier of the kingdom and only his young son was at home. Draupadi persuaded this prince to go forth against the invaders with Arjuna, in his eunuch's garb as the charioteer. The latter took charge of the battle and routed the Kauravas. It then became obvious that the Pandavas had been discovered. But the year of hiding had also ended coincidentally at the same time. The Pandavas proclaimed their identity. Virata's daughter was married to Arjuna's son in another dynastic alliance. This young warrior was also the nephew of Krishna, the Yadava chief who had emerged as a close friend and adviser of the Pandavas.

The Pandavas now looked to regaining their kingdom. They also thirsted to avenge the dishonour and deprivation they had suffered at Kaurava hands. Only Yudhishtira, ever the righteous ruler, sought to avoid war. It was eventually decided that Krishna should go to the Kaurava court to seek a peaceful solution. However, Krishna's mission failed: the Pandavas were prepared to settle for the return of only five villages; but Duryodhana, defiantly insisting that their claims were spurious, refused to part with even a needle point of land. The blind king could do nothing because of his love for his son. Bhishma, Drona and the other Kuru elders acknowledged the justice of the Pandava claim, but felt bound by their loyalty to the throne of Hastinapura. War became inevitable.

Both sides gathered enormous armies. Practically all the chiefs of the time joined one camp or the other. Krishna's brother Balarama alone refused to take sides. Krishna himself agreed to become Arjun's charioteer in battle, while he sent his army to fight for the Kauravas. Other notable Kaurava supporters, apart from Karna and Shakuni, were Duryodhana's brother-in-law Jayadratha, King of Sindhu, and King Shalya, the maternal uncle of the two younger Pandavas, who was tricked by Duryodhana into joining him. The Pandava allies included King Virata and the father of Draupadi, as also the ogre Ghatokacha, the son of Bhima by a demon-princess, conceived during their first flight from Hastinapura.

The war took place on the plains of Kurukshetra. At the moment of its commencement, when Arjuna saw all the relatives and friends arrayed against each other in the opposing armies, he was so depressed that he laid down his weapons and declared that the bloodshed was pointless. But Krishna manifested his divine aspect and, in the famous discourse of the Bhagavad Gita, exhorted Arjuna to do his duty in what was a conflict between right and wrong.

The fighting lasted eighteen days. There were many feats of valour and guile, generosity and brutality. At first, while the noble patriarch Bhishma commanded

the Kaurava armies, the code of chivalry and the rules of warfare were respected. But gradually they were broken by both sides. Knowing that Bhishma would not bear arms against a eunuch, the Pandavas cunningly sent one against him, and Arjuna shot the old general down from behind. Then Arjuna's young son, Abhimanyu, was lured into unequal combat and killed by the Kauravas. Drona, who had taught the martial arts to the princes on both sides, was in turn killed when he had stopped fighting as a result of false information confirmed to him by none other than the righteous Yudhishtira. Each such incident inflamed passions and made certain that the war would continue.

From the Kaurava side Karna alone was considered a match for Arjuna. Just before the war he had been told by Krishna, and by his natural mother, about his relationship with the Pandavas and invited to change sides. But he refused to do so, remaining steadfastly loyal to his friend Duryodhana. Thereafter he was tricked into parting with his magic armour and exhausting his most potent weapon before he had the opportunity of facing Arjuna. He went into that combat with a premonition that he would die. It was a marvellous duel, watched by the gods. Eventually Arjuna was able to kill him, unchivalrously, while he was trying to pull out his chariot wheel stuck in the ground.

Ultimately, the Kaurava side was almost entirely destroyed. Only Duryodhana and a few others remained. Wounded and tired, Duryodhana hid in a lake where he was found by the Pandavas. He challenged them to single combat, and a great duel with maces then took place between him and Bhima. Finally, Bhima brought him down with a foul blow which shattered his thigh, the same thigh that he had bared for Draupadi. Vanquished but still defiant, Duryodhana berated Krishna and the Pandavas for their perfidies and boasted that while they suffered a war-ravaged world, he would have an honoured place in heaven befitting a true warrior and king.

As Duryodhana lay dying, he appointed Drona's son as his new commander and approved his plans for a midnight massacre of the Pandava forces. This scheme was carried out and only the five brothers escaped. Thereafter Yudhishtira ruled justly for many years. But joy had gone out of the times with the destruction of war. Eventually Yudhishtira departed with his wife and brothers to seek salvation in the high Himalayas, leaving the kingdom to Arjuna's grandson.

By the time of Bhasa the epic story had been told and retold over the centuries,

and its principal characters and their deeds had already made a deep impact on popular imagination. First, there were the five Pandava brothers with their exemplary loyalty and devotion to each other. Pandu was their father only in name: actually they had been begotten of the gods. Endowed with qualities of semi-divine excellence, they were nevertheless intensely human. Yudhishtira was virtue and wisdom incarnate, but still prone to human errors and lapses which he later regretted bitterly. Bhima was simple but stronger than ten thousand elephants and swift as the wind; he was also given to gluttony and moved by violent passions. Arjuna, a romantic knight, was the warrior without equal. His son Abhimanyu, the beloved of the whole family, showed promise of excelling his father, but was killed before reaching his prime. The other two Pandava brothers, the twins, Nakula and Sahadeva, were noted for their comeliness and learning. The queen Draupadi was beautiful, imperious and the moving spirit in keeping steeled the resolve of her five husbands to avenge the wrongs they had suffered.

The Kauravas were less virtuous, but not without nobility. Duryodhana's envy and jealousy of his cousins had gradually turned into an obsession. But he was proud, courageous and kingly. His uncle Shakuni incited him to wickedness, but was personally brave and devoted to him. His friend, the noble warrior Karna, was loyal and generous to a fault. His father, blind in life, was also blind to his shortcomings because he loved him too deeply. His grand-uncle Bhishma and his preceptor Drona, respected elders of the kingdom, tried their best to bring the two sides together. Bhasa highlights the noble qualities of all these characters in his plays.

Krishna has an ambivalent role in the epic, both human and divine. As an incarnation he upholds virtue, suppresses wickedness and shows the path to salvation. At a human level his advice is often worldly and amoral. Bhasa reflects both these aspects in his characterization.

Finally, a few words about these translations. It is well known that because of differences in linguistic construction and literary convention, literal or even too faithful translations from Sanskrit into English often become unreadable. To attempt to bridge the distance between the letter and the spirit of one language and that of the other is the real challenge for any translator. As indicated at the beginning of this note, a scholarly translation of these plays already exists. The endeavour in the present instance has been to produce not a work for scholars

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