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Dr. Pallabi Dutta

Assistant Professor, Department
of Sanskrit, Pragjyotish College,
University of Gauhati, Assam,
India

Sanskrit literature depicting harmony with nature with special reference to Bhāsa's *Svapnavāsavadatta* and *Pratimā*

Dr. Pallabi Dutta

Abstract:

In Sanskrit, the word nature means 'prakṛti' referring to the environment of all living beings which is a matter of great importance in the present. Environmental pollution has become a serious problem for the entire planet. Environmentalists have been offering suggestions from time to time to provide environmental conservation measures and to prevent pollution. But the main thing is to alter people's perceptions. There is no solution to this problem unless there is a change in human consumerism. The key to changing this attitude lies in our minds. Understanding and accepting the non-sentient reality of natural forces is necessary for living in harmony with nature. Since the Vedic period, nature has been instrumental in various literary works. Ancient Sanskrit literature, viz., the Vedas, the Rāmāyaṇa, the Mahābhārata, the Purānas, and the classical Sanskrit Literature and so on, reflected the interdependence of nature and mankind. Our ancient poets have minutely observed nature and have given an artistic touch to their works when they depict human feelings towards nature. Although their natural consciousness is not always explicit, a deep study of their works reveals their implicit knowledge of depicting harmony with nature. Bhāsa, the earliest Sanskrit dramatist, was a profound lover and keen observer of nature. The thirteen plays of Bhāsa throw light on the flora and fauna that greatly contributed to the wealth of the forest of his period. Natural beauties filled with picturesque features that form part of their essential natural character find a very unique place in Bhāsa's *Svapnavāsavadatta* and *Pratimā*. Adopting considerable measures to make people aware of our dependence on nature is the prime concern of the hour. In the present paper, an attempt is made to focus the harmonious relationship between mother nature and human beings as revealed in the *Svapnavāsavadattā* and the *Pratimā* dramas of Bhāsa.

Keyword: Sanskrit literature, harmony, the environment, Bhāsa's plays, nature

Introduction

Our day-to-day life is based on the environment. The three basic elements of human life, i.e., food, cloth, and habitat, can be taken from various sources depending upon the environment. It also regulates the temperature on earth where life activities are possible. Therefore, we must protect our environment from various kinds of pollution. Environmental research has emerged as a critical issue in the modern era. With the increase in the population, the ruthless destruction of natural flora and fauna is in evidence. It is also to be mentioned that the awareness of conservation of the environment is not a new concept. There is an enormous amount of literature, beginning from the *Rgveda* till today, where we find a harmonious relationship between living beings and the entire environment. Our Vedic sages and ancestors lived harmoniously with nature. All the activities of their daily lives are essentially dependent upon nature. They believed that protection and worship of nature were the Dharma of every individual. The *Atharva-veda* resembles the present-day concept of sustainable management of natural resources. According to this Veda, one can take from the earth and nature only so much as one puts back into them. It is to be mentioned that almost all the poets of Sanskrit literature are great lovers of nature. There are many pieces of evidence to highlight the love and care of Sanskrit poets for flora and fauna. In this paper, our endeavour will be to discuss the harmonious relationships between nature and human beings as reflected in the *Svapnavāsavadattā* and *Pratimā* of Bhāsa.

Bhāsa, the earliest Sanskrit dramatist, is supposed to be the father of Indian dramas. His popularity and fame as a dramatist is testified by the high level of praise bestowed upon him

Corresponding Author:

Dr. Pallabi Dutta

Assistant Professor, Department
of Sanskrit, Pragjyotish College,
University of Gauhati, Assam,
India

by poets like Kālidāsa and Bāṇabhaṭṭa^[1]. Kālidāsa, in the prologue of his *Mālavikāgnimitra*, pays tribute to Bhāsa by 'established renown'^[2].

The dramas of Bhāsa were first brought to light by Mahāmohopādhyāya Taruvāi Gaṇapati Śāstri of Trivandrum, who succeeded in finding out some of the plays of the writer in the year 1909 and published them in 1912. The learned scholar has compiled and published the following works and has attributed them to Bhāsa:

1. Madhyamavyāyoga,
2. Pañcarātra,
3. Dūtavākya,
4. Dūtaghaṭokaca,
5. Karṇabhāra,
6. Ūrubhaṅga,
7. Pratimā,
8. Abhiṣeka,
9. Bālacarita,
10. Svapnavāsavadattā,
11. Pratijñāyugaṇḍharāyaṇa,
12. Cārudatta and
13. Avimāraka

According to their subject matter, the thirteen plays mentioned above are categorized under five heads as shown below:

1. Mahābhārata plays: Madhyamavyāyoga, Pañcarātra, Dūtavākya, Dūtaghaṭokaca, Karṇabhāra and Ūrubhaṅga.
2. Rāmāyaṇa plays: Pratimā and Abhiṣeka
3. Kṛṣṇa legend: Bālacarita
4. Udayana plays: Svapnavāsavadattā and Pratijñāyugaṇḍharāyaṇa
5. Fictional plays: Cārudatta and Avimāraka

Like other celebrated Sanskrit writers, like Kālidāsa and Śūdraka, Bhāsa is also silent about his age and personal life. The thirteen plays attributed to him have not given anything regarding his identity. Scholars have given different arguments regarding the actual date of the writer. The data bearing on his date is scanty and dubious in the extreme, and consequently, scholars have arrived at widely divergent conclusions. However, the celebrated scholar A.D. Pusalker has placed Bhāsa between the 5th and 4th centuries B.C.^[3]

Bhāsa's *Svapnavāsavadattā* is based on the legend of King Udayana. It depicts the story of Udayana's losing and then regaining his kingdom from a usurper with the help of his loyal minister and his chaste wife, Vāsavadattā. Another play, Pratimā's plot, is taken from the *Rāmāyaṇa*. The play gets its name from the subject matter. It deals with the incident that Bharata came to know about the tragic death of his father (Daśaratha) on seeing his statue (*Pratimā*) in the statue-house at the entrance to Ayodhyā. It is to be noted that Bhāsa's dramas mainly deal with ingenious adaptations of themes of heroism. For example, the six *Mahābhārata* plays deal with battles and killings in the line of epic stories. And most of his dramas are very short. Therefore, natural elements find less scope to shine. But despite such constraints, the author exhibits his mastery in delineating natural beauty and harmony as demanded by the plot of the drama concerned. Now let us examine how Bhāsa depicts harmony with mother nature in his *Svapnavāsavadattā* and *Pratimā* in particular.

Bhāsa has expressed himself as a keen observer of nature. In the first act of the *Svapnavāsavadattā*, we find that "the deer are roaming about freely and without taking fright, full of confidence engendered by the place as being secure; the trees with their branches loaded with flowers and fruits are all

tended with kindness; the herds of cows from the wealth (of the ascetics) are for the most part brown-coloured; the quarters disclose no fields (of corn), and this smoke (that is seen) is rising from many sources (huts); undoubtedly this is a penance-forest^[4]. In this verse, Bhāsa has beautifully depicted the serene atmosphere of a hermitage. Ordinarily, deer are very frightening creatures and run away at the slightest sound. But here, they lived fearlessly because of the faith given by the dwellers of the hermitage. This shows the quiet and peaceful life of the ancient sages who lived in their hermitages. The same view is expressed by Mahākavikālidāsa in his *Abhijñānaśākuntalam*.^[5] Even nature has the same deep affection towards people. Rāma is so much a part of nature. When he departs from Ayodhyā, the lordly elephants stop eating, and the chargers stand silently, mournfully, with tears in their eyes—

nāgendrāyavasābhilāṣavimukhaḥsasreṣaṇāvājinoheṣāsūnya mukhā....^[6]

Here, we find nature as working in perfect harmony with human life as well. This type of blending of nature and human feeling in the plays of an ancient playwright like Bhāsa proves his awareness of the environment.

People of Bhāsa's period did not want to hindrance to the religious performances and pursuits of the ascetics. They have attached higher importance to *Dharma* than to their dignity. This thought is creatively explained in the first act of the *Svapna-vāsavadattā* - 'may bring from the forest at will, the holy water, sacrificial sticks, flowers, and darbhas, which from the wealth of ascetics. The princess who is a lover of religious rites, will not certainly desire that the sacred duties of ascetics should be obstructed: this is her family vow^[7].' It reveals the ethical code of conduct of people towards nature. They were well versed in the fact that without a holistic attitude to nature, man could not protect the pristine environment. Obstruction of or hindrance to the religious performances and pursuits of ascetics were prohibited.

In ancient times, mountains were the symbols of sanctity. The various forests and rivers of the mountains help to maintain the ecological balance of the world. People understood the importance of mountains to their survival. So, they used to worship mountains and perform different auspicious deeds on them. Sanskrit literature has also attached great importance to some mountains from a very early age. In the final benediction of his three dramas (*Svapnavāsavadattā*, *Dūtavākya*, and *Bālacarita*), Bhāsa describes both the Himālaya and Vindhya as the ear-rings of the earth impersonated as a lady-

‘emāmsāgaraparyantāmhimavadvindhyaakuṇḍalān/ mahīmekātapatrāṅkāmrājasimhaḥpraśāstunah//’

Again, in the *Pratimā*, it is stated that the mountain was covered with many medicinal plants^[8].

Flora and Fauna

Flora and fauna play a preeminent role in the ecosystem. The word "flora" refers to all plant kingdoms occurring in an area or period. Plants play a vital role in the conservation of the environment that is congenial to mankind. At the time of Bhāsa, the mountains were densely forested, teeming with various birds and beasts^[9], and the forests provided an ideal home for the pious^[10].

Bhāsa has mentioned various terms of the plant kingdom viz., *vrkṣa*^[11] (big tree), *gulma*^[12] (a cluster or clump of

trees), *latā* ^[13] (a creeper), *drumā* ^[14] (tree), etc. Apart from these, mentions of different parts of plants such as *vitapa* ^[15] (branch), *mūla* ^[16] (root), *phala* ^[17] (fruit) are found in his plays. Many important trees, like *saptacchada* ^[18], *candana*, ^[19] *samidhaḥ*, ^[20] *aśoka* and *saptaparṇa* ^[21] etc., are found scattered in different places in Bhāsa's plays. Among flowers, lotus and water-lily are mentioned several times with their varieties- *nilotpala*, *nalini*, ^[22] *kokaṇada*, and *mriṇāla*, ^[23] etc. Other beautiful flowers like *chephālikā*, ^[24] *bandhujīva*, ^[25] *asana*, ^[26] *kokanada*, ^[27] *mādhavī*, ^[28] and *lodhra* ^[29] are also mentioned. Bhāsa has also referred to *kāśa*, ^[30] *kuśa*, and *darbha* ^[31] as different kinds of grass.

Thus, Bhāsa's plays contain a long list of trees and flowers that were common to the people of his time. Generally, these flowers, creepers, and trees reflect the aromatic form of the environment and enhance natural beauty as well. They also give information about a specific season. For instance, the fourth act of the *SV* delineates the blooming *mādhavī* flower, the fragrance of which enhances the natural beauty of the *pramodavana* (garden) as well as indicates the autumn season.

Fauna refers to the animal life of a region. India is the land of innumerable birds and animals, both wild and domestic, many of which occur in Bhāsa's dramas. Bhāsa has mentioned several auspicious and sweet-throated birds like *cakravāka*, ^[31] *kokila*, ^[32] *sārasa* ^[34] and *kokila*, ^[35] etc. The plays of Bhāsa mention a large number of animals of different kinds, viz., *turaṅga* and *vājina* ^[36] (horse), *nāgendra*, ^[37] *gaja* ^[38] (elephant), *vyāghra*, ^[39] *vānarāḥ* ^[40] (monkey), *khargo* ^[41] *mṛga* ^[42] (deer). It is important to note that the names of cows, horses, and elephants are repeatedly mentioned in Bhāsa's plays, perhaps for their great contribution to mankind. A cow contributes a lot in the fields of the economy as well as ritual. *Go* ^[43] (cow or ox), *dhenu* (the mother of a calf), and *vṛṣabha* ^[44] (a bull) are names to denote a cow.

Insects, the little things that run the world, represent roughly two-thirds of the biodiversity on earth. People of Bhāsa's period were acquainted with the importance of an insect for which they were far from scaring and killing even a honey bee-

rājā- māmābhavānevam/ madhukarasantrāsahparihāryaḥ/ ^[45]

Thus, Bhāsa's plays throw light on the flora and fauna that greatly contributed to the wealth of the forest of his period.

Portrayals of Nature

Bhāsa was also a profound lover and keen observer of nature. The description of the group of the flying white cranes is very powerfully and elegantly expressed in his *Svapna-vāsavadattā* - 'now stretched in an even line, now wide apart, now soaring high, now sinking low, crooked in its twists and turns, as the group of seven Rsis. Bright as a serpent's belly just slipped from its slough, like a boundary line, it cuts the sky in two.' ^[46] In this way, Bhāsa has beautifully presented the flight of cranes moving in compact mass, charming and white, like a garland of *kokaṇada* lotuses. The delineation of nature also finds a pivotal place in Bhāsa's plays. His enthusiasm for the co-existence of nature and life is revealed at the end of the first act of the *Svapna-vāsavadattā*-

'The birds have returned to their nests. The hermits have plunged into the stream. Fires have been lit and are burning brightly, smoke is spreading in the penance grove. The sun has dropped a long way down, gathering his rays together, he turns his chariot and slowly, descends on the summit of the western mountain ^[47].' Here, the description of sunset and

evening is very natural and simple. Again, the delineation of the *seoli* flower, whose gorgeous looks are compared with pendants of pearls intersert with coral -

pravālāntaritarivamauktikalambakairācītāḥkusumaiḥ/ ^[48]

Moreover, Bhāsa has mentioned so many natural phenomena, such as the unbearable heat of the autumn season— *śaratkālatikṣhṇoduḥsahaḥātapah/* ^[49] etc.

Bhāsa's keen observation is seen in the description of the instant scene after watering the plants by Sītā- 'The water is still swirling with its bubbles in the trench, the thirsty birds alighting are not yet drinking the muddy stream as their holes are flooded out, dragged insects are crawling to dry ground. The trees appear to have new girdles with the wet rings where the water sinks at their roots.' ^[50]

These simple and natural beauties, filled with picturesque features that form part of their essential natural character, find a very unique place in Bhāsa's plays. Bhāsa, with his art of writing, is truly inspiring. In the fifth act of the *Pratimā*, Bhāsa portrays the character of Sītā as a nature lover. When she leaves the forest, her departure has an impact on nature- 'Bid farewell to your adopted children, the deer, the trees, the Vindhya forest, and all your friends, the beloved creepers. I am to dwell in the Himalayan groves, coloured by the brilliant growth of healing herbs ^[51].' The same idea is more powerfully and elegantly expressed by the great poet Kālidāsa in his *Abhijñānaśākuntalam*. ^[52] While sending Śakuntalā to her husband's abode, the sage Kanva reminds the trees about her care for them and asks permission from each for her departure.

In some verses, natural scenes are seen to be presented with poetic similes and metaphors, which are not only apt but suitable for the context, increasing its beauty. In the *Pratimā*, Bharata on his way to Ayodhyā finds the high speed of the trees to appear as if running with his chariot, the dust in the spokes looking like the water of a river passing through them, etc ^[53].

In conclusion, it can, therefore, be said that a deeper relationship with nature is found in the plays of Bhāsa. Both the *Svapna-vāsavadattā* and the *Pratimā* made numerous references to the intended environmental awareness. People become more environmentally conscious as a result of such ideas delivered through literature, and their myopic deeds towards nature are reduced.

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vanamabhigamyamanasvinovasanti// Svapna-
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casaptarṣivamśakuṭilām ca
nivartaneṣu/nirmucyamānabhujagodaranirmalasya
sīmāmivāmbaratasyavibhajyamānām// Svapna-
vāsavadattā SV., I.2
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svairam̐vanādūpanayantutapodhanāni/
dharmapriyān̐r̥pāsutāna hi dharmapiḍā
micchettapasviṣukulavratametadasyāḥ//Kale MR,
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tṛṣitapatitānaitēkliṣtam̐pibantijalam̐khagāḥ/
sthalam̐bhipatantyādr̥h̐kīṭā bile jalapūrite
navavalayinovr̥kṣāmūlejalakṣayarekhayā//
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51. āpr̥cchaputrakṛtakānharināndrumām̐scavindhyaṁvanam̐ta
vasakh̐r̥dayitālātāśca//vatsyāmiteṣuhimavadgirikāneṣu
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yānādatte priyamañdanāpi bhavatām̐ snehena yā
pallavam̐/ādye vaḥ kusumaprasūtisamaye yasyā
bhavatyutsavaḥseyam̐ yāti śakuntalā patigrham̐
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