

Portrayal of Family Ties in Ancient Sanskrit Plays: A Study

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Abstract

The journey of the Indian dramatic art begins with classical Sanskrit drama. The works of the ancient dramatists Bhasa, Kalidasa, Bhavabhuti and others are the products of a vigorous creative energy as well as sustained technical excellence. Ancient Sanskrit dramatists addressed several issues in their plays relating to individual, family and society. All of them shared a common interest—familial and social stability for the collective good. Thus, family and society became their most favoured sites for weaving plots for their plays. Ancient Sanskrit dramatists with their constructive idealism always portrayed harmonious filial relationships in their plays by persistently picking stories from the two great epics Ramayana and Mahabharata and puranas. The paper examines a few well-known ancient Sanskrit plays and focuses on ancient Indian family life and also those essential human values which were thought necessary and instrumental in fostering harmonious filial relationships.

Keywords: *Family, Filial, Harmonious, Mahabharata, Ramayana, Sanskrit drama.*

The ideals of fatherhood and motherhood are cherished in Indian society since the dawn of human civilization. In Indian culture, the terms ‘father’ and ‘mother’ do not have a limited sense. ‘Father’ does not only mean the ‘male parent’ or the man who is the cause of one’s birth. In a broader sense, ‘father’ means any ‘elderly venerable man’. In another sense it is a title of respect. Similarly, ‘mother’ does not only mean the ‘female parent’ or the woman who gives birth. All those who give nourishment and show maternal care are mothers. The term ‘mother’ applies even to Nature that surrounds us.

Bhasa stands foremost among those dramatists who are remarkable for their maturity of thoughts and feelings. His vision of love finds its best expression through filial love and filial piety. There are many references from his Ramayana-based full-length plays *Pratimanataka*, *Pratijnayaugandharayana*, and Mahabharata-based one-act plays such as *Madhyamavyayoga*, *Urubhanga*, which provide ample material on the subject. Bhasa’s *Pratimanataka (PN)* takes inspiration from the epic Ramayana for its theme. In this seven-act play unmatched filial love and filial piety are made manifest. Bhasa’s Rama, is always shown as duty-bound throughout the play. The human aspect of his life has also been emphasized up to a great extent. The play begins with the abandonment of the coronation ceremony of Rama at the demand of his step-mother Kaikeyi and ends with the return of Rama to Ayodhya.

The first act relates the details of the announcement of Rama’s coronation ceremony by his father King Dasaratha and its subsequent cancellation followed by Rama's retirement to forest life. The very first expression of Dasaratha’s paternal affection for him is revealed when Rama himself confides in Sita that his father Dasaratha “placed me on his knee as he used to do, when I was a child” and said “Rama, my son, do thou accept the kingdom” (Woolner and Sarup *PN* 161). The gesture of placing Rama in his lap is suggestive of Dasaratha’s paternal love especially in light of the universally acknowledged fact that parents cherish the physical touch of their children for it gives them a unique and inexpressible pleasure.

Rama is not upset at all at the sudden stoppage of his coronation. In fact his “mind breathed a sigh of relief, as if a weight was removed” (Woolner and Sarup *PN* 161). In a way, he is happy because “I am still the same Rama, and the king is king” (Woolner and Sarup *PN* 161). Rama’s affection for Dasaratha readily makes him agree to abdicate his rights to the kingdom, and to go into exile in the dense forests for fourteen long years. But, he cannot understand “why the people are amazed at my patience” (Woolner and Sarup *PN* 161) and questions their way of thinking “is it a marvel, if a son obeys the words of his own father?” (Woolner and Sarup *PN* 161). At the same time, not a word of blame escapes his lips against his step-mother Kaikeyi who is responsible for his misery. He shows equal love and reverence for his biological mother as he does for mother Kaikeyi. He cannot even in the wildest of his dreams suspect her integrity and hence “wish [es] to hear no further charge against my mother” (Woolner and Sarup *PN* 164). Such is his pure filial love and devotion towards his parents.

Bhasa devotes the whole of the second act to portray the grief of Dasaratha supported by the two queens, Kausalya and Sumitra, the mothers of Rama and Lakshmana respectively. Bhasa’s description of the king’s lamentation fired by Rama’s separation is truly heart-rending. Dasaratha’s frustrated condition is very much evident when he deliriously calls “Oh, where is he? Where is that Rama who delights the eyes and hearts of all the people. Where is he? So obedient to his elders” (Woolner and Sarup *PN* 168). The parents ever wish that their children should live happily. But Dasaratha’s greatest misfortune is that he has to witness the suffering of his own children right before his eyes. At the very prospect of this torturous future Dasaratha swoons thrice and finally breathes his last.

The picture of motherhood is also presented in a majestic way with great dignity. Bhasa’s portrayal of Kaikeyi’s character deserves special attention here. Initially in the play, she is depicted as a hard-hearted, selfish and narrow-minded lady for exiling Rama into the forest for fourteen years, in much the same way as in Ramayana. In the third act when Bharata comes to know that his mother Kaikeyi is responsible for his father’s death and his brother’s banishment he disowns her declaring that “a woman who brings misery to

her husband is denounced even by her son”(Dikshit 31). It is Kaikeyi’s character that stands out foremost here. She silently endures all his harsh treatment with utmost patience and tolerance. Because, she is convinced that once Bharata realizes the truth, it won’t be long for him to regret his haste and plead for forgiveness. Bhasa, the master psychologist understands the maternal love and concern of Kaikeyi for her son in its entirety and treats her character as thoroughly human so that a deep understanding and compassion is evoked for her. He introduces the dramatic device ‘curse’ and holds it responsible for her un-wifely and unmotherly conduct. In the sixth act, at an appropriate time Bharata is told by Kaikeyi that the exile of Rama was more a consequence of a sage’s curse than her own action. When Bharata regrets his earlier hasty accusations of his mother and begs her pardon it is a glorious victory of motherhood. She is not a whit behind any other in showing maternal love as she replies, “Ah, child, what mother but forgives a son’s offence? Nay, rise. How are you to blame? (Woolner and Sarup *PN* 196). While the popular legends present the character of Kaikeyi in a villainous manner, Bhasa takes the poetic license and portrays her character as an affectionate mother in his play.

Bhasa’s *Pratijnayaugandharayana (PYGR)* is a secular play with a political motif. But there are very few descriptions in Sanskrit dramatic literature to match the second act of the play. The whole of the second act gives us an idea as to the conception of the duties of the parents towards their daughters. In this act, we see the king Mahasena and his queen Angaravati discussing the marriage of their daughter Vasavadatta. The queen wishes that her daughter may get married soon. At the same time she does not want to part with her. This mental conflict in her is a clear indication of the tenderness of the mother’s heart. As a father, king Mahasenas’s anxiety about finding a suitable groom for Vasavadatta and giving her away in marriage at the most appropriate time is also suggestive of his paternal affection.

During ancient times in India, fixed marriages were the order of the day even though *gandharva* type of marriage (love marriage in modern context) was also allowed and had both religious and social sanction. According to the law of Manu, the responsibility of finding a suitable groom and getting the daughter married rests more with the father of

the bride. Hence, Mahasena is very much concerned about the qualities of the head and heart of the prospective bride-groom. In the fourth act, when the news of Vasavadatta's elopement with the prince Udayana reaches them, queen Angaravati's maternal ego is grievously hurt and her anguish knows no bounds. Arranging, overseeing and witnessing the proceeding of a son's or daughter's wedding are a remarkable and unforgettable experience in the lives of all parents across the world. This is what Angaravati missed as a mother and hence is upset. She even attempts to commit suicide but is eventually rescued and pacified by her husband on being told a consolatory piece of news that the wedding had taken place by the law of the warrior caste, that is, in the *gandharva* tradition. After sometime she reconciles to her fate, and celebrates her daughter's wedding by performing marriage to portraits of Vasavadatta and Udayana. Forgiving children of their follies is an essential parental quality which is what both Mahasena and Angaravati as parents demonstrate.

Even though, a one-act play is by far shorter in length when compared to a full-length play, Bhasa creates sufficient room in it to portray loving filial relationships. For example, the parental love of Dhritarashtra and Gandhari for their son Duryodhana is brilliantly pictured in the one-act play, *Urubhanga (UB)*. Duryodhana's love for his own child Durjaya is remarkable for its charm and naturalness. His son Durjaya's character is known to the epic. But master playwright Bhasa invents his character to show how intensely loving a father Duryodhana is. Duryodhana in this play is far different from his epic counterpart. He is a respectful son to his parents, a proud and noble husband and an epitome of paternal love.

The play has four distinct parts but the third and penultimate part is worthwhile because it is in this phase that the kin from the three generations are made to meet and exchange heart-touching emotional conversation amongst themselves. Duryodhana is crestfallen not because of the fatal blow he received in the hands of Bheema but because he cannot rise and offer "salutation to my father's feet" (Woolner and Sarup *UB* 53). Dhritarashtra is overwhelmed by grief because all of his hundred sons would be dead with the death of his most beloved son Duryodhana. Fate is so cruel to Dhritarashtra that he is left with no

son to perform his own funeral rites after death. Doubly painful is the thought that at this old age he is fated to perform funeral rites for his sons.

A woman who personifies maternal tenderness is certainly an image of love. A mother's heart is never biased. She treats all of her sons and daughters equally without any discrimination. She leads her children safely through the world's difficulties and faces all odds with courage and diligence. Hence in a child's life the mother's role is very special and crucial. The mother-and-son relationship between Gandhari and Duryodhana is strikingly so intimate that even while his life is ebbing away Duryodhana urges his mother, "with folded hands I ask, if I have earned any merit, be thou my mother in another life" (Woolner and Sarup *UB* 55).

By exemplifying Duryodhana's paternal affection for his son Durjaya, Bhasa shows to the world that even a villainous character like Duryodhana may have a heart capable of profound love which ". . . melts at the sight and the fond overtures of his little son" (Bhat 53). His parting advice to his little son asking him to serve the Pandavas, respect his grand-mother Kunti and show filial reverence to Draupadi as well as to Abhimanyu's mother show that fathers are equally responsible in moulding the character and destiny of their children.

The *Madhyamavyayoga* (*MV*) is another one-act play based on Mahabharata epic in which Bhasa creates an imagined incident in a delightful manner to portray parental affection and filial obedience. Ghatokacha son of Hidimba by Bhima, in his search for food for his mother's breakfast accosts a Brahmin family consisting of parents and three sons. Ghatokacha decides to kill the *madhyama* ("middle one") among the sons. Ghatokacha is fully aware of the fact that it is a heinous sin to slay a Brahmin. But he is bent upon fulfilling his mother's wish even if it brings him infamy. Ghatokacha says, "This is a foul deed I must do to-day, but it is by my mother's behest, and that removes all hesitation" (Woolner and Sarup *MV* 145). Ghatokacha's maternal devotion is unquestionable and is admirably brought out by Bhasa. In fact, at one place, one can mark how much of importance Bhasa attaches to the ideal of motherhood and the role of

a mother in shaping the destiny of her children when Bhima says, “A mother is for humans the deity of deities. By honouring our mother’s command we have come to this condition” (Woolner and Sarup *MV* 151).

On the other hand, the self-sacrificing nature of the sons to protect their parents and save their family from the perilous situation is praiseworthy. Finally, when the middle son finds that both his parents are more attached to his other brothers, he is not upset at the fact but considers it as a great opportunity to fulfil their heart’s desire and is ready to hug death. He says, “Blessed am I that with my own life have protected the lives of my elders. From the great love of kin comes the desire for death that is rare indeed” (Woolner and Sarup *MV* 147).

Kalidasa also treads the path of his predecessor Bhasa and even excels him in portraying loving filial bonds in his plays. Kalidasa’s play *Abhijnanasakuntala* (*ABJS*) is a testimony to this fact. The heroine Sakuntala is the adopted daughter of Sage Kanva. Her original parents are Sage Viswamitra and celestial nymph Menaka. Nevertheless, she receives unmatched fatherly affection from her foster-father Kanva. The fourth act which deals with the scene of departure of Sakuntala to her husband’s house remains as a jewel in the crown of entire Sanskrit dramatic literature for the display of filial affection between father and daughter. Ascetics generally do not allow worldly feelings to affect them. But Sage Kanva is also just like any other father on earth. He is overwhelmed with mixed reactions of affection and sorrow because his daughter is leaving the hermitage permanently to join her husband. His piece of advice to Sakuntala as regards her conduct and conjugal duties at her in-laws house is a touching reflection of his fatherly concern and care for her beloved daughter.

Similarly, maternal love is also remarkably portrayed by Kalidasa with equal care and attention through the character of Gautami. Though a *tapsi* which means ‘hermit woman’ she is like a foster-mother not only to Sakuntala but also to the rest of the girls brought up at the hermitage. Sakuntala, her friends Anasuya and Priyamvada, and all her other female and male counterparts treat Gautami with respect and love. She is addressed

lovingly as *jate* which means 'mother.' Gautami behaves like a typical mother by nurturing and teaching Sakuntala good manners and behaviour. In the fifth act, her maternal instinct and concern for Sakuntala is best expressed in the court scene, when she breaks her silence and openly repudiates Dusyanta the king for his refusal to accept Sakuntala as his wife. When all her attempts to bring back Dusyanta's memory fail, she is not angry with Sakuntala but pities her instead. Moreover, her confidence in Sakuntala is not shaken and she is convinced that Dusyanta is her husband. In short, Gautami substitutes for Menaka as mother and showers her maternal love on Sakuntala and stands by her side in difficult time.

But when Gautami's efforts fail to unite Sakuntala with Dusyanta, at the end of the fifth act an unexpected development in the dramatic action takes place. A celestial light in female shape suddenly appears and carries away Sakuntala to the skies. She is none other than her natural mother Menaka. Moved by the plight in which her daughter is and triggered by her own maternal instinct she rushes to rescue her daughter and free her from the present turmoil. In this way, Kalidasa does poetic justice by elevating the character of Menaka. She may have thrown her baby in the wild jungle to no one's trust in an un-motherly way. But one should be given a second chance for atonement of sins. Kalidasa as a humanist, with this conviction, by his dramatic genius, makes Menaka descend from heaven and carry her darling daughter Sakuntala away. Such is the quality of maternal love we find in the plays of the master dramatist Kalidasa.

The tradition of picking appropriate episodes from the epic material and depicting harmonious familial relationships on stage continues to find place even in the works of Bhavabhuti who lived during the eighth century A.D. His *Uttararamacarita* provides abundant material on loving filial relationships. The play begins with Rama's renouncement of Sita and ends with the reconciliation of Rama with Sita and his children Lava and Kusa. However, Bhavabhuti's total dramatic design is not only to idealize conjugal love but also to underline the value of harmonious filial ties. The goddess of Earth Prithvi's love for her daughter Sita, Rama's deep paternal affection for his children

and their filial piety towards their parents and elders are presented in a befitting manner by the dramatist.

Love, sacrifice, kindness, affection, benevolence, attachment, and other human values were properly painted in the treatment of the theme of filial relationships in the above mentioned works. The love of parents towards their children and the children's unquestioning obedience and reverence for their parents was delineated with exquisite aesthetic expression and emotional appeal. It is needless to say that such traditional images of fatherhood, motherhood and filial piety that were extolled and glorified in these works must have left a very positive impact on the ancient Indian's subconscious mind.

We may safely assume that the Hindu religion was in its heyday during the times of Bhasa, Kalidasa and Bhavabhuti as the growing popularity of Puranic Hinduism spread to the nook and cranny of the Indian sub-continent. The charming spell of the two great epics Ramayana and Mahabharata and the Puranic literature is so great on the ancient Indian mind that, "In considering the values, norms and behaviour of people in a country such as India, one cannot ignore the influence of the scriptures and the epics" (Srinivas 174). The ancient Indian society dominated by Hindus meticulously followed the Vedic lore in their daily routine and regulated their lives by practicing the ideals set for them in the two great epics Ramayana and Mahabharata.

From the above discussion it is clear that the reverence for family ties was firmly established in India from the earliest times. The epics provide us with pictures of affectionate and amicable joint family life. It has already been referred to at different places that the atmosphere of cordiality, respect and affection was prevailing in the family especially between the parents and children. Interestingly, the thematic content of the Hindu epics also happens to be so special and unique that, "In no other country have personal matters—generally family affairs—become the subject-matter of epic poems" (Ram 121). Hence, the lofty ideal of a Hindu joint family teeming with affectionate

familial relationships reflected in these two great epics offered a great stimulus to the classical dramatists to nourish it further with the sentiments of love and sacrifice.

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