THE MĀTTA-VILĀSA AND "BHĀSA"

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I

IN 1912 Pandit Ganapati Sastri, the learned editor of the Trivandrum Sanskrit Series, began to publish a group of thirteen plays, all apparently by the same author, which now fill numbers 15-17, 20, 22, 26, 39, and 42 of the series, and for which he claims Bhāsa as author. As Bhāsa was considerably earlier than the great Kālidāsa, who speaks of him in the prelude of his *Mālavikāgnimitra* as a poet of established reputation, and as no works of Bhāsa have hitherto been known to survive, this discovery has naturally aroused much interest, and the erudite Pandit's ascription of the plays to Bhāsa has been generally accepted.

The plays themselves bear no author's name. But one of them bears the title *Swapna-vāsavadatta* or *Swapna-nāṭaka*, and is on the same legend as a play of the same name and on the same subject as one which a witty verse in the *Sūkti-muktāvalī* mentions as a work of Bhāsa. Beyond these references of Kālidāsa and the *Sūkti-muktāvalī* and an ambiguous description of his technique in the preface of Bāṇa's *Harsha-charita* (early in the seventh century A.D.), nothing is known of Bhāsa; and as probably half a dozen other poets have written plays on the same theme as the *Swapna-vāsavadatta*, we shall do well to hesitate before subscribing to the theory of Pandit Ganapati Sastri.

The Pandit, however, has some other arguments in favour of his view. He points out that in classical plays, such as those of Kālidāsa and his successors, the prelude begins with a *nāndī* or opening verse or verses, after which the stage-manager (*sūtradhāra*) enters and begins to speak, but that these plays of "Bhāsa" usually begin with the stage-direction "after the *nāndī* the stage-manager enters", and the latter then recites an opening verse. This, together with the fact that in these plays the prelude is called *sthāpanā*, whereas in the classical drama it is termed *prastāvanā*, are in the Pandit's opinion proof that these plays are pre-classical; and as Bāṇa in his *Harsha-charita* tells us that

Bhāsa's plays were *sūtradhāra-kṛitārambha*, i.e. had "beginnings" performed by the stage-manager, these plays therefore are plays of Bhāsa. This, of course, is a *non sequitur*. Again, the rhetorician Vāmana (eighth century ?) quotes in the commentary of his *Kāvya-lankāra-sūtra* three verses from these plays; but he does not mention the name of their author. Daṇḍin, who was not much later than Kālidāsa, cites in his *Kāvya-darśa* (ii, 226) a verse (*Limpatīva*, etc.) which occurs in two of these plays; but it must be admitted that it is a stock line, which recurs in several other authors, and Daṇḍin says nothing about its authorship or source. Again, the rhetorician Bhāmaha, in his *Kāvya-lankāra*, iv, 40-4, seems to refer to one of these plays, the *Pratijñā-yaugandharāyaṇa*; but Bhāmaha does not mention the author of the latter, and in any case Bhāmaha is later than Kālidāsa, whose *Mēgha-dūta* he criticizes (i, 42-4). The *Artha-śāstra* ascribed to Kauṭilya contains a verse (*Navam śarāvaṇi*, etc.) which occurs in the *Pratijñā-yaugandharāyaṇa*; but this again proves nothing, for the verse is an old tralatitious one. Finally, whilst we must admit that some of the verses in these plays are strikingly similar to some stanzas of Kālidāsa and other classical poets, and that one play, the *Chārudatta*, seems to be the original of the *Mṛich-chhakatika* attributed to Śūdraka, these facts are very far from establishing the authorship of Bhāsa. The dramas are and must remain anonymous; and all that can be said in regard to their date is that their style seems to be fairly early, and that the *Bharata-vākya* or final benedictory verse in six of them mentions a king Rājasimha as reigning.

II

In 1917, however, the Pandit published as No. 55 of the Trivandrum Sanskrit Series a little play which throws some light on the authorship of these dramas. This is the *Matta-vilāsa*.

The *Matta-vilāsa* is a *prahasana* or farcical sketch in one act. It depicts in a lively and caustic style the adventures of a drunken Kapālin, or Śaiva religious mendicant, bearing a human skull in lieu of an alms-bowl, who with his wench wanders through the purlieus of Conjevaram to visit a tavern. Here he loses his skull-bowl, and while frantically searching for that precious object he comes upon a Buddhist friar. The latter is a somewhat frail son of the Church, for he confesses to a regret that the Law

of the Buddha forbids him the company of the fair sex and the enjoyment of strong liquor; he even ventures to conjecture that these prohibitions have been interpolated in the Law by spiteful elders, and asks himself where he can find an uncorrupted text of the scriptures, which he may publish for the benefit of his brethren. The Kapālin and his wench, seeing the friar's alms-bowl, argue with vinous obstinacy and ingenuity that it is the skull-bowl which they have lost, and the friar, who at first is attracted by the charms of the damsel and the liquor which he sees her and the Kapālin swilling, nevertheless resists their demand, and a scuffle ensues, in which the Kapālin and the woman are knocked down. The Kapālin shrieks for aid, and a Pāsupata, a follower of a more respectable form of the Śaiva religion, appears on the scene. To him the Kapālin appeals, charging the friar, whom he names Nāgasēna,¹ with the theft of his bowl, while the friar mumbles the Sikkhā-pada. After some wrangling they agree to go to the police-court. Then comes in an Unmattaka, or crazy devotee. From him, after some clowning, the lost bowl is recovered, and all ends happily.

More interesting than the play itself is the question of its authorship and date. On this point there can be no doubt. The prelude informs us that the author is a Mahārāja of the Pallava dynasty, named Mahēndra-vikrama-varman, son of Simha-vishṇu-varman; and the scene is laid in Kāñchī, the modern Conjevaram. We may therefore identify him with the king of that name, who is known to us from the inscriptions, which give him also the titles of *Guṇa-bhara*, *Avani-bhājana*, *Matta-vilāsa*, and *Śatru-malla*, and mention a farce *Matta-vilāsa* by him.²

The present little play exactly suits these data. Its scene is laid in Conjevaram, the capital of the Pallava kingdom; it bears the title *Matta-vilāsa*; it alludes to his titles *Avani-bhājana*, *Guṇa-bhara*, and *Matta-vilāsa* on p. 1; and in its final benedictory verse it prays that "the world . . . may be well ruled by *Śatru-malla*, who by his power stills his foes". This king flourished about A.D. 620; and the play may with certainty be assigned to that period.

¹ Nāgasēna is the name of the famous Buddhist divine who is the protagonist of the *Milinda-panhā*.

² See *South Indian Inscriptions*, vol. i, pp. 29-30; *Epigraphia Indica*, vol. iv, p. 152; *Archaeological Survey of the Director-General of Archaeology*, 1903-4, pp. 270 ff.; G. Jouveau-Dubreuil, *The Pallavas*, pp. 37 ff., etc.

Now the *Matta-vilāsa* shows exactly the same features of technique as the plays attributed to Bhāsa, except that the author is named in the prelude: it opens with the stage direction "after the *nāndī* the stage-manager enters", and the latter recites the introductory verse; the prelude is styled *sthāpanā*; and there are several points of likeness in the style. As Mahēndra-vikramavarman lived in the seventh century and Kālidāsa probably was about a hundred years earlier, these features in the plays of "Bhāsa" are therefore no evidence for a date earlier than that of Kālidāsa; and we are fully justified in holding that both the *Matta-vilāsa* and the plays of "Bhāsa" are products of a south-eastern school of drama which had not accepted the rules of technique which later became universal (probably through the increasing influence of Kālidāsa and his school), and that the works of "Bhāsa" are really anonymous products of some humble poet of the seventh century, who did not introduce his name into his preludes because it carried no weight. Hence it is perhaps not unreasonable to conjecture that the king Rājasiṃha mentioned in the final verses of the plays of "Bhāsa" is the Pāṇḍya Tēr-Māraṇ Rājasiṃha I (c. A.D. 675).