FOREWORD

Despite the profusion of plays in Sanskrit the interest in historical drama was limited. Sanskrit plays generally have romantic themes. Their stories involve kings and princesses, lovers unable to immediately resolve the problem of being together, whether in forests or extensive palace gardens, and entangled plots with happy endings. Essentially fiction, they occasionally touch on incidents with historical echoes. Beyond that there is little history. So an entire piece like "Rákshasa's Ring" on the minutiae of a historical event is unusual. This history play is all the more striking since it was written at a time when other kinds of court theatre were at a premium.

Vishákha·datta was the author of three plays, one of which is referred to in commentaries but has not been found. The other two both focus on what by any definition would count as historical situations. The *Devicandragupta* has survived only in fragments but they are sufficient to give a flavor of the original. Passages have been quoted from it in later works that discuss drama. The only play that has come down to us in its entirety is "Rákshasa's Ring" which accordingly has become the touchstone of Vishákha·datta's reputation as a dramatist.

His date remains approximate as is the case with many Sanskrit authors. At the end of "Rákshasa's Ring" there is a complimentary mention of a king, Chandra·gupta. This has been taken as a reference to Chandra·gupta II of the Gupta dynasty (c. 375–415 CE). The compliment can be seen as a possible acknowledgement of the king who is his

benefactor. This theory is perhaps affirmed by the narrative of the *Devicandragupta* which concerns an incident of court intrigue in the Gupta dynasty. Rama·gupta, the brother of Chandra·gupta II, was defeated in battle by the Sakas of western India, and he agreed to send them his wife as their trophy of victory. His younger brother Chandra·gupta, not yet king, was incensed by this act of cowardice. He went in disguise to the Saka court and rescued his sister-in-law, Dhruva·devi. According to some accounts he eventually married her, having usurped the throne after the assassination of Rama·gupta. Even if fictive the story makes for high drama.

If the play was written to justify the king's actions, then presumably he would have been a contemporary, which would place Vishákha·datta in the early fifth century CE. It could of course have been written later in order to re-enact earlier events (as in the case of Kali·dasa's late fourth- or early fifth-century "Málavika and Agni·mitra," which introduces persons associated with the Shunga dynasty of the first century BCE). This more protracted chronology has been suggested because the name Chandra·gupta in the play was replaced by the names of other rulers in other recensions. But that may be just a meansof complimenting the contemporary patron in whichever court the play was performed.

If "Rákshasa's Ring" was written during the earlier Gupta period then the author would have been part of the literary efflorescence of that time and in competition with Kali·dasa. This may have been one reason why he was overshadowed, tending not to have won the appreciation he

deserves. Of course the themes of his dramas are different from those of Kali·dasa and far less scope is given to poetry and fantasy. When describing his ancestry at the start of the play it is said that his grandfather was a *sāmanta*, a feudatory, but that his father took the title of *mahārāja* which was a rise in status. It is likely that Vishákha·datta was close to the court and the politics of the time and this may also have encouraged him to enquire into the politics of the past.

The politics that he chose were of the crucial period that witnessed the transition from the Nanda dynasty to that of the Mauryas in the fourth century before the Common Era just after the campaign of Alexander of Macedon in north-western India (c. 326 BCE). The Nanda kingdom was centered in Mágadha (in present day Bihar), and had moved tentatively in the direction of what was later to become an imperial system. The first of the successor rulers, Chandra·gupta Maurya, when still a young man is said to have usurped the Nanda throne under the direction of his advisor Chanákya, also known as Kautílya. The much-quoted work on political economy and governance, the *Arthaśāstra* ("Treatise on Power"), is attributed to Kautílya and some parts of it at least may well have been written to advise the young man on his assuming kingship. Chandra·gupta established Mauryan imperial power, conquering much of northern India. The Empire reached its zenith during the reign of his grandson, the famous Ashóka.

The play focuses not on kings but on two ministers. Both were Brahmans but by nature noticeably different. The time-span covers the short period when Nanda power had effectively come to an end but the formal announcement of Mauryan accession was awaited. The minister to

the Nandas, Rákshasa, a man of considerable status and much respected by the subjects of the kingdom, was still trying to rally support for the Nandas. Chanákya is therefore anxious to have him transfer his loyalty to Chandra·gupta so that his presence would lend legitimacy to the new king. Given Rákshasa's loyalty to the last Nanda king, Chanákya had to trap him into serving the new king. Chanákya is wily and unscrupulous whereas Rákshasa is concerned with values of loyalty and friendship. In a sense it is predictable that he will be trapped, but the play takes on shades of a game of chess with every move enmeshing the gamesmen.

"Rákshasa's Ring" is centrally concerned with the usurpation of power and how this can be legitimized. This was not an unknown theme in courtly literature. In a sense the play is an attempt to enlarge the historical moment. Vishákha·datta draws on an imagined reconstruction of the event where the historical background is taken as given but its enlargement is imaginary. A text claiming to represent a historical event would have to be accepted as such by the audience and the imprint of the past would need to be reasonably authentic. This best occurs when a believed memory has benefitted from at least a little endorsement by the archive.

Two questions become important at least for the historian. First, what was the archive in terms of the sources that our author might have consulted to narrate an event that had occurred approximately eight hundred years earlier; and second, why did he choose this event ?

Vishákha·datta probably consulted many sources, but the primary one was presumably the *Viṣṇupurāṇa* ("An-

cient Lore of the God Vishnu"). This states unambiguously that Kautílya uprooted the Nandas and proclaimed Chandra·gupta as the first Mauryan king. It also states that the Nandas were of low caste, regarded as Shudras, and that their successors were equally low caste. This is one among many interesting examples of non-conformity with the social code pertaining to caste—the *varṇ' | āśrama | dharma* (customs of social orders and life stages). The code was constantly re-iterated in the normative texts but there are enough deviations from it to have made social history quite adventurous. There are also hints that the playwright knew the *Arthaśāstra* since some statements are close to what is advised in the text. Greek sources too mention Xandrames and Sandrocottos, identified as the Nanda king and as Chandra·gupta, though there is no reason to believe Vishákha·datta had access to these works.

Stories from Buddhist and Jaina texts were being constantly retold and would therefore have been current also at the time when Vishákha·datta was writing. Buddhist interest in the Mauryas was because of their patron, Ashóka. They depict Chanákya as a brilliant if shrewd strategist, who having been slighted by the Nanda king swore vengeance. He faked a vast sum of counterfeit money with which he acquired an army to overthrow the Nandas. He recognized the qualities of the young Chandra·gupta and therefore made him his protégé for kingship. For the young man there was an element of grand adventure and a play on the politics of power. Jaina sources claim that Chandra·gupta in his last years became a Jaina ascetic. There is little in the sources to suggest Rákshasa's character so we must assume that his

depiction and his dilemma—caught between loyalty and strategy—is the creation of Vishákha·datta.

Why Vishákha·datta chose this historical moment as the core of his play is of interest. However much Brahmanical sources put down the Mauryas as low caste and heterodox, as for instance in Chanákya's frequent epithet of Vríshala (Shudra) for Chandra·gupta, nevertheless they emerge as the heroes in the alternate tradition of the Buddhists and Jainas. Mauryan governance—and especially that of Ashóka—would have challenged the normative theories of the Arthaśāstra and the many dharmaśāstras (treatises on law). Was it an intellectual and historical curiosity that led Vishákha·datta to replay some of these earlier events to question the legitimacy of Chanákya's actions and thereby explore the Puranic mention of a historical event?

The Mauryan imperium would have been well known and the existence of Ashokan inscriptions all over the Subcontinent doubtless added to the awe for their creator even if their social ethics did not conform to those of the dharmaśāstras. The pillars of Ashóka carrying his edicts were treated as a prototype and in Gupta times attempts were made to imitate them. One was re-used to record the victories of the Gupta king, Samúdra·gupta. But of course the play although ostensibly about the Mauryan triumph over the Nanda dynasty actually presents the conflict between two different political strategies; and although Chanákya triumphs through sheer chicanery one is left with the feeling that the real hero is the gentle and sensitive Rákshasa.

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