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The *Vidushaka* in Sanskrit Drama

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Origins

The *Vidushaka*, the jester or clown in Sanskrit drama, must have been an old member of a dramatic troupe, because Bharata mentions him, along with the hero and the heroine (of dramatic compositions) and other actors, as receiving divine protection in a stage performance.¹

How the *Vidushaka* came to be an essential part of the acting talent performing on the stage is not difficult to imagine. Bharata accepts that the main objective of dramatic performance is diversion and pleasure to the tired or distressed mind, an uplifting of the soul and an awareness of noble and moral values through its incidental exhortation.² The value of the *Vidushaka* as a source of entertainment is quite obvious. Besides, Sanskrit drama, in the course of its development, adopted love and heroism as the principal themes of dramatic compositions. Bharata considers that laughter, which is the essential contribution of the *Vidushaka*, is closely connected with love; so, the *Vidushaka* has a natural place as a companion of the hero in a comedy of love.

But the source from which this character emerged is neither certain nor clear. A. B. Keith and other scholars assume a religious and ritual origin for Sanskrit drama, on the lines of Greek and Western drama. They believe that the *Vidushaka*, too, came from the *Mahavrata* ritual which contains a dialogue between a *Brahmacharin* (a celibate religious student) and a hetaira and an exchange of abuse between the two.³ I am not fully in favour of this hypothesis of religious origin, though there is no doubt in my mind that Sanskrit drama was nurtured and developed under strong religious impulse and influence. Religious influence and religious origin are two different things. Religious inspiration and influences were inevitable in ancient times when religion was the only force that shaped human life. In India, every honest activity, including the arts, was regarded as dedication to God. The *Natyashastra* clearly recognises music, dance and drama as different forms of worship⁴; and Kalidasa describes *natya* as a 'visual sacrifice' offered unto the gods.⁵ To ascribe a divine origin to the performing arts is a way of extolling them to establish their importance in human life. But to believe in divine or religious origin is to ignore the secular elements in dramatic art, the natural instinct of humanity for mimicry and acting, and the objective of pure entertainment and pleasure. This is of particular significance in the case of laughter because ritual or religious performance has always been a serious and solemn affair in India; it can never be regarded as ridiculous or funny even though some of the imitative or mimic acts in a ritual may appear amusing to the unfamiliar eye. The dialogue between the *Brahmacharin* and the prostitute is a solemn ritual which cannot be parodied or used for laughter. The element of fun entered at a very late stage, in the days of sectarian religious practices, modes of life and pretentious conduct. Further, even if the *Mahavrata Brahmacharin* were to be imagined as a prototype of the Brahmin *Vidushaka* how are we to explain the origin of the other three types of *Vidushaka*-s mentioned in dramatic theory? It is against this background that I would like to suggest that the idea of the *Vidushaka* was probably derived (not from an *asura*) but from the *comic presentation of an asura character on the stage*. The two are different things.

Four types of Vidushaka-s

Bharata mentions four types of *Vidushaka*-s: *Lingi* or *Tapasa*, associated with a celestial hero; *Dvija* or *Brahmin*, the companion of a royal hero; *Rajajivi* or a royal employee connected with a minister (or merchant); and *Shishya* or pupil who accompanies a Brahmin preceptor.⁶ In the extant Sanskrit dramatic literature, out of the four types, only the Brahmin and pupil *Vidushaka*-s have survived: the first in the *Nataka*, *Natika* and *Prakarana* types of plays, which are comedies of love, and the second type in the *Prahasana*-s.

Writers on dramaturgy describe in detail the qualities of these types.⁷ *Lingi* or *Tapasa*, the *Vidushaka* of the gods, has a comprehensive range of knowledge, is an expert on judging the pros and cons of an issue, speaks truthfully and realistically, knows dramatic business (*natyavid*) and has a capacity for fun and laughter. Narada would probably represent this type well. He appears in Bhasa's *Avimaraka* and *Balacharita* and in a later play, *Ratimanmatha* by Jagannatha Pandita. Narada does not actually figure as a comic character; even so, Bhasa's Narada declares himself to be a 'lover of quarrels'. He enjoys watching the conflict between the gods and demons, and finds the eternally quiet heavens boring; and so 'during the intervals between sessions of Vedic study' he loves to

tighten the strings of his lute and create feuds among people. This fun-loving element is clearly seen in the personality of Narada.

The *Vidushaka* attached to a merchant-hero is supposed to be a rogue; he is ugly in appearance; his speech and gesture are uncouth. This type is not to be found in the surviving dramatic texts. The hero of Shudraka's *Mrichchhakatika* is the Brahmin merchant, Charudatta. But his jesting companion Maitreya does not embody these qualities (of the *Rajajivi*) though he does have a deformed head and sometimes employs coarse expressions in his speech. The *Vidushaka* of a minister is supposed to touch the weak spots of others, to speak wittily, using obscene language, and he is also expected to arrange for the diversions of pleasure-seeking women. Some of these traits are illustrated by the *Vidushaka* Vasantaka in Bhasa's *Pratijna-yaugandharayana*.

Bharata's pupil-type *Vidushaka*, who avoids study sessions and loves a gay and amusing life, is illustrated in a *Prahasana* by Bodhayana, namely, *Bhagavadajjukiya*.

The most common type in extant Sanskrit drama texts is the Brahmin *Vidushaka*, figuring as the companion of the royal hero. His speech and wit are comparatively of a higher level and he has the ability to make even cultured people laugh. He is liked by the female attendants of the queen. He moves about freely in the harem and instigates mutual jealousies and rivalries. As a king's companion he encourages the romance between the royal hero and his beloved. Sometimes he acts in a blundering fashion in order to provoke laughter. But he has the wit to pacify an angry queen or score a victory over her on behalf of his friend, the royal hero.

It is not necessary to check if all the qualities mentioned by Bharata are illustrated in the character of the *Vidushaka* because the *Shastra* intends to provide general directions and guide-lines for the creation of this character. Later theorists, too, appear to imagine many other qualities; and evidently, some of them seem to have in mind particular *Vidushaka*-s portrayed by classical dramatists.

It could be equally true that dramatists themselves took their cue from the *Shastra* and associated a number of qualities or traits with their *Vidushaka*-s, keeping in mind his essential role as an entertainer and as a source of stage laughter. This is best represented in the portrayal of the Brahmin *Vidushaka*.

This *Vidushaka*, figuring in the royal court comedies of love, is a Brahmin in name, and beyond his sacred thread and probably some detail of apparel there is no inner quality to designate him as a true Brahmin. He does not remember the *Gayatri mantra*; he cannot speak cultured Sanskrit, but uses the vernacular spoken tongue; he does not even know the correct number of Vedas! Santushta (of Bhasa's *Avimaraka*) boasts of having mastered five verses, within a year, of a *natyashastra* called *Ramayana*! The *Vidushaka* is unable to read; but if he is confronted with written words, he is prepared to bluff his way out by declaring that the particular letters do not exist in the manuscript he has studied. Although untutored, he is resourceful enough to take a hurried bath at the garden-well, to make a show of muttering Vedic *mantra*-s and walking quickly towards the royal harem in order not to miss the meals and gifts offered by the queen.

He is generally referred to as a *maha-brahmana*, meaning a fool. But that does not stop him demanding the honour and respect due to a Brahmin. Gautama (in Kalidasa's *Malavikagnimitra*) finds fault with Malavika's dance performance because it did not begin with Brahmin-worship and Maitreya resents being asked to wash the feet of Charudatta.

Being a Brahmin, the *Vidushaka* loves food and is a glutton. A maid easily dupes Santushta with an invitation for meals and lifts from him a precious ring. Kalidasa's Manavaka reveals a royal secret at the prospect of sweet food. For him the kitchen is paradise. He compares the moon to a broken sweet ball; and the king aptly observes that food is the only subject for a natural glutton. Maitreya recalls with nostalgia the happy days in the prosperous house of Charudatta when he sampled a number of dishes to taste the flavour of food, like a painter touching different pigments on his palette with his brush. Vasantaka in *Svapnavasavadatta* regrets his indigestion as it prevents him from enjoying a hearty meal.

Bhavabhuti observes that a Brahmin's prowess is in his speech, which implies that he is a physical coward. Many *Vidushaka*-s, like Vasantaka and Gautama, are mortally afraid of serpents. Maitreya fears dark nights and is not prepared to step out unless a female attendant keeps him company. Atreya (in Harsha's *Nagananda*) is paralysed by an attack of bees. The palace maids, too, frighten the *Vidushaka*, as Madhavya confesses in Kalidasa's *Shakuntala*. The maids usually score over a *Vidushaka* and turn him into a butt of ridicule.

Sanskrit dramatists have used the *Vidushaka*'s pretensions to being a high-caste Brahmin, his ignorance about the Vedas and the *Shastra*-s, his gluttony and his cowardice (which is sometimes openly expressed or sometimes disguised by a show of false bravery) for evoking laughter. In course of time these traits naturally lost their freshness. In later dramas, therefore, the figure of the *Vidushaka* tended to become stereotyped, mechanical and stale. Once in a while there is some variation, as in Harsha's *Nagananda* where the drunken *Vita*, a *Cheta* and a palace maid make a total fool of the *Vidushaka* and force his exit from the stage with his face blackened with the juice of *tamala* leaves.

The Vidushaka's role in the Purvaranga

As a necessary member of dramatic troupe, the *Vidushaka* played a significant role in the ancient *Purvaranga* and helped to introduce a dramatic performance to the spectators. This was done in *trigata*, which is the eighteenth among the nineteen items of the ancient *Purvaranga*. It was a conversation between the *Sutradhara* and his two assistants (*Pariparshvika*). To present this item one of the assistants takes the role of the *Vidushaka*, suddenly leaps forward, and starts a conversation which is enigmatic, inconsistent and conducive to laughter. The questions the *Vidushaka* asks are vague; but they serve to introduce the topic of the drama in production and possibly its author. Since Bhasa's times a regular introduction of the play and the playwright was included in the *Prastavana*, immediately following the *Purvaranga* performance, by the *Sthapaka* or by the *Sutradhara*.⁸ Some evidence of this ancient practice, where the *Sutradhara* and the *Vidushaka* introduced the dramatist and his play, first in a veiled manner and then by announcing names, may be found in Bhasa's *Charudatta*, Shudraka's

Mrichchhakatika, a sixteenth century play *Adbhutadarpana* of Mahadeva, and the theatre practice of Marathi drama in its first phase. In the process of evolution the ancient practice came to be replaced by the dramatist's own *Prastavana* (prologue), in which the *Sutradhara* and his wife (*Nati*), or one of his assistants participated to introduce the author and his play, using only some items like the *Nandi* and *Prarochana*, of the elaborate *Purvaranga*, and also employed certain dramatic devices, noted in Bharata's theory, to indicate the opening of the first scene.

The dramatic function of the Vidushaka

But it is the dramatic and not the technical function of the *Vidushaka* that is more important for a student of Sanskrit drama. Bharata says that laughter (*haasa*) arises out of love (*shringara*). This was possible when an improper or ridiculous element entered the demonstration of love. Bharata's statement that laughter is derivable from love, together with the friendly mode of address (*vayasya*) established between the royal hero and the *Vidushaka* in the convention of drama, fix the position of the *Vidushaka* as a hero's companion in a romantic comedy of love. The function and role of the *Vidushaka* have also been firmly established in later dramatic theory, so that the *Vidushaka* is often described as *Kama-sachiva* or *Narma-sachiva*, a minister of love, or pleasantry, of a royal hero.

The *Vidushaka* performs a twofold function as the hero's companion in a story of love. He assists the hero to fulfil his love for the heroine. And in moments of unfulfilled love, sorrow and separation, he provides the necessary diversion for the hero through words of hope and encouragement and by his amusing speech and behaviour. Dramatists naturally use their discretion in shaping the role that the *Vidushaka* plays in their story. Sometimes a *Vidushaka*, like Kalidasa's Gautama, may actively help the royal hero by devising elaborate schemes to enable the hero to see the heroine, talk to her or meet her in a secret rendezvous. Generally the *Vidushaka* encourages the hero in the conduct of his romance. He also helps the hero by striving to pacify his queen who is apt to be provoked by the king's pursuit of love. But sometimes the *Vidushaka* (for instance, Madhavaya in *Shakuntala*) may not quite approve of the king's romance.

As a companion in sorrow and separation, the *Vidushaka* invariably acts as a cheerful, amusing and often mirthful friend of the hero. Whatever may be the worth of the *Vidushaka's* assistance in this regard, there is no doubt about the *Vidushaka's* devotion and attachment to the hero. Characters like Santushta (in Bhasa's *Avimaraka*) and Maitreya (in Shudraka's *Mrichchhakatika*) are prepared to lay down their lives for their hero and friend; and most of the *Vidushaka's* suffer personal inconvenience and punishment for helping the hero in the face of the queen's displeasure.

The most important function of the *Vidushaka* is, of course, to provide laughter. According to Bharata, the *Vidushaka* can evoke laughter in three ways: by his body, by his costume and by his speech.⁹ The first two refer to the stage appearance of the *Vidushaka*. If the *Vidushaka* is made up as a deformed person, with protruding teeth, as bald, hunchbacked, lame or with a distorted and ugly face, the physical appearance is bound to be a source of laughter. It must be remembered that *this is a matter of stage make-up*. So, Sanskrit dramatists use

some detail of physical deformity or ugliness in creating their character of the *Vidushaka*. Kalidasa, for example, has his clowns resemble in appearance a 'brown monkey'. Shudraka's Maitreya has a misshapen head, similar to the knee of a camel, and he has two side-locks of hair on his head that resemble crow's feet. The *Vidushaka* of Rajashekara is bald. Another detail is the gait of the *Vidushaka* and his gestures. If he were to walk like a crane, eyes turned up and rolling, or waving his crooked stick (*kutilaka*) and taking extra-long strides, his movements would certainly be funny. Details of the *Vidushaka's* dress are not available. The theory mentions use of barks and skins, very loosely tied *dhoti* (lower garment), and a face marked by lines of black soot, ash or red chalk. The *Vidushaka's* cap, particularly that of the Brahmin type, may have come into vogue in theatre practice.¹⁰

Apart from these theatre appliances, the real humour probably came from the *Vidushaka's* nonsensical, inconsistent but witty speech. Though very often a butt of ridicule and a source of fun and laughter for others, the *Vidushaka* has a keen perception and an ability to express himself with wit and wisdom on the oddities of human life. The manner in which Gautama ridicules the dance masters and even King Agnimitra himself is worthy of mention. He compares Agnimitra to a vulture hovering over a kitchen, greedy for cooked meat but afraid to enter. The dance masters are said to be earning wages and gifts under a show of teaching; they are like two rams or elephants rushing at each other's heads. When Agnimitra is surprised by his younger queen's visit while he is in the process of making overtures of love to the heroine, he turns to the *Vidushaka* for help, Gautama advises him thus, 'Run for your life!' Speaking of the obesity and enormous size of Vasantasena's mother, Maitreya wonders how she could have entered the apartment through the door, and answers his own query by declaring that the apartment walls must have been built around her!

Sometimes, however, the *Vidushaka's* remarks are much more than mere fun or cheap vulgarity; they are a penetrating comment on human nature. King Pururavas receives Urvashi on the terrace of his palace on a full-moon night and, forgetting that they are not alone, offers her half his seat. The *Vidushaka* promptly asks, 'Have you two started your night just here?' Maitreya is suspicious of a courtesan's intentions and describes her as a pebble caught in a shoe; even when the pebble is removed, the hurt continues. So, the *Vidushaka* is like Shakespeare's Touchstone:

'.in his brain
 . . . he hath strange places cramm'd
 With observation'

Donning a jester's cap, the *Vidushaka* often moves through life as an amusing critic of the oddities and inconsistencies in human nature.

Other functions

As a member of dramatic troupe, the *Vidushaka*, being a minor character, was sometimes required to describe the scenic background, introduce a character or arrange a situation (like Malavika's dance performance). This was necessary because the ancient Sanskrit stage was practically bare of scenic arrangements

and stage props. The information had, therefore, to be orally provided through a character like the *Vidushaka* already present on the stage or through technical devices of plot construction.

The *Vidushaka* often acted as a messenger for the royal hero, and was also a repository of his secrets.

The *Vidushaka* appears to have also become a court jester in course of time. In Rajashekhara's plays there is a clear indication of this professional role played by the *Vidushaka*. In this capacity the *Vidushaka* often appears as a critic of court life and royal caprices.

Dramatists sometimes use the *Vidushaka* to build their dramatic plot, as Bhasa does in his two Udayana plays. Kalidasa, on the other hand, develops his *Shakuntala* by skillfully arranging for the absence of the *Vidushaka* in a dramatic situation.

It is to be expected that the *Vidushaka* would serve the important dramatic function of providing comic relief in an emotionally tense or tragic situation. The plays of Bhasa, Kalidasa and Shudraka are a testimony to this function that a comic character is meant to fulfil.

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Notes:

1. *Natyashastra* (NS), Gaekwad's Oriental Series (GOS), I. 97.
2. *Ibid.* I. 11; I. 106-107; I. 108-114.
3. Keith, *Sanskrit Drama*, Oxford University Press, 1926.
4. NS, GOS, XXXVII. 29-30.
5. *Malavikagnimitra*, I. 5.
6. NS, GOS, XXIV. 16-20.
7. See my book, *The Vidushaka*, Ch. IX.
8. *Ibid.* Also, my *Bharata-Natya-Manjari*, Introduction, pp. LXV-LXVII.
9. NS, GOS, XII. 137-142; 142-146.
10. See my *Vidushaka*, pp. 123-128. Also my article "Vidushaka's Cap", Dr. Mirashi Felicitation Volume, Vidarbha Samshodhan Mandal, Nagpur, 1965. pp. 336-343.

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* *Woman and Jester*, Terracotta, 5th century A.D. (From the Government Museum, Mathura). The picture has been kindly supplied to us by the American Institute of Indian Studies, Varanasi.

(Courtesy: Archaeological Survey of India).