

THE CURTAIN IN ABHIJNANA SAKUNTALA

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The physical limitations of a stage, its shape, size; acting areas; entries and exits; technical equipment such as curtains and other mechanical devices available, or the lack of them, compel the playwright to adopt certain conventions, which are reflected in the dialogue of the characters, in the dramatic devices they use and in the stage-directions they give for the guidance of the actors and the producers. The classical Sanskrit playwrights were no exception to this rule as the plays amply justify the above statement. They seem to be writing for a stage with which they were quite familiar. The stage available to these playwrights could be no other than the one described in the *Natyasastra* ascribed to Bharata, for, they all, more or less, follow the rules laid down in this *sastra* upto the 9th or 10th cent. A.D. after which new dramatic forms make their appearance needing a change in the stage form also. But even these new stage forms were not radically different it seems from the stages described in the *Natyasastra* as can be seen from such works as *Bhavaprakasana*, *Nrttyaratnavali* and *Samarangana Sutrādhara*. All that was done was that a new orientation was given to the old forms to make them suitable for the changed times, though a new *vritta* (circular) form had also come into being according to *Bhavaprakasana*.

This continuity in the classical stage form during the classical period did not mean that the form of the physical theatre as a whole also had remained the same. What is meant here is that the basic structure of the stage, the playing-space and its divisions with a total lack of any other equipment except the curtains must have remained the same, while its architectural form was undergoing changes during these centuries, in tune with the numerous religious monuments and secular buildings of different periods.

By and large the stage described in the *N.S.* then must have been the stage available to the classical playwrights and more so to Kalidas, who was one of the earliest writers of the classical period. This stage was the *Vikrsta Madhya* (Rectangular middle-type) described in the *N.S.* as the best suited for mortals, presumably for its excellent acoustic qualities and

sight-lines. This stage was completely bare and its only equipment were the curtains, one of which was called the *Yavanika* between the *Rangapitha* (RP) and the *Rangasirsa* (RS) and others were on its two doors variously called *Pata*, *Pati* or *Apati*. Apart from these, stage-directions in *Sakuntala* and many other plays clearly indicate the use of a third type of flexible curtain which was brought on the stage by two persons in the same manner as it is done even to-day in our traditional theatre.*

The two doors according to the *NS* were curtained. These are mentioned in the Chapters XIII 2-3; XXXI 435-437; XXXII 410; XXXIII 227 (English trans. of the *NS* by M.M. Ghosh, Calcutta 1957).

The other curtain mentioned by the *NS* is *Yavanika*, in Chapter V, 8-11; 12-15. The *Yavanika* was between the RP. and RS. The word *Yavanika* had created some misunderstanding in some Western scholars of earlier decades as it was said to have been the result of the Greek influence on the Sanskrit drama forgetting that no curtain was used in the Greek theatre at all, as it was neither practical to do so nor was it necessary on the open-air Greek stage of vast proportions.

A third flexible curtain was also used. The use of this multi-coloured curtain called *Chitra Yavanika* by Bhavabhuti in *Malati-Madhava*, was a must if the desired effects with any degree of sophistication on the stage were to be achieved as described in several stage-directions. It could be used in any part of the stage and in a variety of ways to create various effects. And this is the reason why it is used widely even now in many of our traditional dramatic forms such as the *Kootiyattam*, *Krisnattam*, *Kathakali*, *Therukuttu*, *Yaksagana*, *Bhagawat Mela*, *Kuchipudi*, *Veethi-natakam* and *Dasavatara*; it is also used in some form in *Ankia Nat* of Assam and several other forms such as *Bhavai*, etc.

The use of these three types of curtains is illustrated in the following pages with the help of the stage-directions used in *Sakuntala* by Kalidas.

Pati Apati Pata

The simplest use of curtains on the stage doors variously called *Pati*/*Apati*/*Pata* in the *NS* is to be seen in the entries of the characters, such as the *Sutradhara* and later on of the *Nati*. The *Sutradhara* might have entered the stage simply by pushing the *Pati* to one side. After the *Nandi* was sung, the *Sutradhara* looked towards the *Nepathya* (नेपथ्याभिमुखवलोक्य-1) as the stage-direction says and called the *Nati*. When he looked at the *Nepathya*

* For a detailed description and discussion of the stage described in the *N.S.* Ch. II, see *Bharata's Stage in Action* Sangeet Natak 24, 1975 and *Use of the Curtain in Classical Sanskrit Drama* Sangeet Natak-25 both by this author.

he naturally looked at the *Pati* on the door and the *Nati* might have entered the stage (“प्रविश्य”-I) by simply pushing the curtain on one side with her hand. The *Vidusaka* in the beginning of Act II, enters the stage in a state of dejection (ततः प्रविशति विषण्णो विदूषकः-II), He would enter in a similar manner by pushing the *Pati* on one side but perhaps pushing it somewhat slower than the *Nati* and the *Sutradhara* and after entering, he might have paused at the door for a moment to establish his mood before proceeding to the *RP*. The *Sisya* who makes his entry as if just awakened from his sleep in Act IV, must also have done likewise (ततः प्रविशति सुप्तोत्थितः शिष्यः). He too must have paused at the door for a while to establish his sleepy mood before he entered the *RP* to find out how much of the night is still to pass. The *Kanchuki* in Act V might have entered in a similar manner. After entering by pushing aside the curtain slowly with one hand he might have paused near the door to lament over his fate; then might have walked about on the stage to go to the king to inform him of the arrival of the *Tapasas* from the sage Kasyapa. The king was already there perhaps in one of the *Mattavarnis* representing a chamber. *Sakhis Pratihapis* etc. also would enter in a like manner.

But the same *Kanchuki* was in a very different mood when he entered in the *Pramadavana* in Act VI to rebuke the two new *Chetis* for plucking the mango blossoms for the spring festival even though the celebration was prohibited by the order of the king. Now he entered with a fling of the curtain (प्रविश्यापटीक्षेपेण कुपितः) to establish his mood of anger. Here the lower part of the *Pati* might have been used in a very dramatic manner as specifically mentioned by Bharata (*NS-XXXII* 470).

The sudden flinging aside of the curtain immediately brings home to the new *Chetis* and consequently to the audience that something unusual had happened as he had entered in a state of anger. It was a very effective device used to bring sudden change in an otherwise gay and playful mood of festivity of the girls who were taken aback at the entry in this manner of the *Kanchuki*.

Anasuya entered similarly with a fling of the curtain (प्रविश्यापटी क्षेपेण) in Act IV. But here the flinging aside of the curtain was used for a different kind of mood. She was in a state of utter dejection and helplessness due to the predicament in which she found Sakuntala. Dusyanta had neither sent for her nor even sent a message and on the other hand she had not even been able to inform Kasyapa that Sakuntala had secretly married the king and that she was pregnant. It was in such an agitated state of mind that she entered with the fling of the curtain. Her *Abhinaya* of the *Apatiksepa* would naturally be somewhat different from the *Apatiksepa* of the *Kanchuki* as the moods were different. The *Kanchuki* would have flung aside the curtain with considerable flourish which would be rather gentler in the case of *Anasuya*.

It must be remembered that immediately after the speech of *Anasuya*,

entered Priyamvada to give the good news that Kasyapa had come to know of the whole episode and has blessed Sakuntala and has told her that she would be sent to her husband under the protection of the *Tapasas*. The stage-direction used for this entry of Priyamvada merely said 'Pravisya' though she too must have been excited at the good news. It seems the poet did not want to mar the effect of Anasuya's entry by repeating the same stage-direction and thus each gained importance in contrast to the other:

Another *Apatiksepa* entry is made by Chaturika in Act VI who entered with the picture of Sakuntala painted by the king. Perhaps she was too excited by the complete likeness of the portrait, for even Sanumati hiding behind the *Tiraskarini*, who had a glimpse of it, had felt as if Sakuntala were standing in front of her!

These door-curtains were used in yet another manner. Dusyanta entered with the charioteer chasing a deer with bow and arrow, ready to shoot, both acting as if riding a chariot. To make this entry swift and powerful the door-curtains must have been drawn aside rather fast and completely by a stage-hand. In Act II when *Vidusaka* sees the king coming surrounded by the *Yavanis*, the *Apati* must have been drawn aside completely again but by a stage-hand in a slow-deliberate manner to give the king's entry a dignity appropriate to his status. Sakuntala and her *Sakhis* with pitchers on their hips could have entered in this way alone, with the *Pati* completely drawn as this was her first entry and heroes and heroines rarely, if ever, made their entries with a fling of the curtain. There are several other entries of this nature in Act III, IV, VI and VII.

Yavanika

Between the *RP* and the *RS* was the *Yavanika* according to the *NS*. (Ch. V, 8-11; 12-15; XXI, 109). The *Yavanika* was drawn at the beginning of the play and nine of the *Purvarangas* were performed behind it. When these nine *Purvarangas* were over, the *Yavanika* was drawn aside, and with the tenth *Utthapana Purvaranga* "so styled because from this the reciters of the benediction start (Lit. raise) first of all in the stage the performance (of the play)..." as the *NS* states (V, 22-23).

This *Yavanika* was such that it would be drawn aside by a single person as we learn from two stage-directions of Bhasa in *Urubhanga* and *Abhisekhnatak*. If this were so, it could not be a single piece of curtain for several practical reasons. It had to be in three pieces, one behind each of the *Mattavaranis* and middle one between *RP* and *Vedika* and thus each piece of the curtain could be drawn aside as the need arose and with ease.

The first entry in Act VI after the *Pravesaka* is that of Sanumati who being an *Apsara*, entered by an aerial path (आकाश यानेन). She being the

friend of Menaka, had been entrusted by her to find out the condition of the *Rajarsi* as she called the king. She could have known this by the power of her *Dhyana* (ध्यान) as she said, but she had been asked specifically to see for herself and hence she was here. She said as she saw the two *Chetis* that "I shall hide (cover) myself behind the *Tiraskarini* (तिरस्करिणी प्रतिछन्ना) and hear what they say." This *Tiraskarini* has been interpreted by some as a *Vidya*, the power by which one could become invisible. This invisibility can be made possible on the stage only in two ways, either by the pretention of all the actors that Sanumati was not there at all or by her actually hiding behind something. Here I would like to interpret the word *Tiraskarini* not as the *Vidya*, but the curtain on the stage. Firstly, because, she said she would hear what the *Chetis* say by 'covering' herself with the *Tiraskarini*, and she could actually have hidden herself behind the folds of a drawn or half-open curtain. This argument is re-inforced, when later she followed the king and the *Vidusaka* in the *Madhavi Mandapa* and here she said that "Hiding behind the creeper (लता संश्रिता) I will see the likeness of my friend from the picture painted by the king", which was presently to be brought to him and after seeing it, she was to admire the skill with which the portrait had been painted. Here she actually could hide behind the 'creeper' to keep herself unseen and one of the pillars could represent the creeper.

It becomes clear from this that if she really could make herself invisible by the *Tiraskarini Vidya* there was no need at all for her to say that she "will hide behind the creeper."

When (तिरस्करिणी गर्वित) is used in the Act by the king for the *Sattva* (spirit) which is creating trouble for the *Vidusaka*, the word *Tiraskarini* here could mean the power of making oneself invisible which Matali certainly had but on the stage this could only be shown by the actors pretending not seeing Matali or by his hiding behind the *Tiraskarini* which is more likely.

This *Yavanika* thus performed several functions. When any part of it was drawn it shut off a portion of the stage giving it a feeling of intimacy and concentration of action in a particular area and thus it performed a function similar to a modern spotlight. It created another area for waiting before entries and concealed the *Purvarangas* not intended to be seen. From behind it, the music to be heard from *Nepathya* by characters could be played.

Chitra-Yavanika

Though *Chitra-Yavanika* had been mentioned by Bhavabhuti in his *Malati Madhava* and where its specific use was also indicated, we do not find it mentioned in the *NS*. But almost in every play there are stage-directions which definitely point to the use of such a flexible curtain which must have been used and it still survives in our traditional theatre as mentioned earlier,

where it is used in a variety of ways. Some of the effects mentioned in the stage-directions of the plays could certainly be possible with the help of the *Yavanika* between *RP* and the *RS'* but because it was a fixed curtain, its use was naturally limited and scenes staged behind it had their own limitations due to practical difficulty of creating too much distance between the actors and the audience which was not desirable in a dramatic form demanding great subtlety in *Abhinaya* speech and music.

In *Sakuntala*, Act V begins with the *Vidusaka* and the king entering seated (ततः प्रविशत्यासनस्था). They had heard the music coming from the *Sangitsala*. At this time the king and the *Vidusaka* might be seated in one of the *Mattvaranis* with the curtain at the back drawn to indicate the chamber as he was said to be resting after *Vidusaka* had left and when the *Kanchuki* entered to inform him that the *Tapasas* had come to see him. The music that the *Vidusaka* and the king heard could only have come from the singers on the *Vedika* to indicate that the song was coming from the *Sangit-sala*. The centre *Yavanika* would remain closed, thus creating a separate area from the acting area where the present action was going on.

There were also stage-directions which described a particular condition or situation in which another character found him or herself and the entry was made by this character later as described. In Act III, Dusyanta came to the *Lata-Mandapa* near the banks of Malini looking for Sakuntala and through the trellis of branches, he said he saw her lying on a "stone-slab" strewn with flowers with her friends beside her. And while he was watching she made her entry with her friends as described (ततः प्रविशति यथोक्तव्यापारा सह सखीभ्ययां शकुंतला).

This entry could only have been made behind the *Chitra-Yavanika*. To bring such a large "stone-slab" on the stage and place it in a particular place there, then the characters arranged on it as described would present too clumsy a picture. Instead, the characters coming on the stage with the seat held by two of them, placing it on the stage, then arranging themselves as described behind the *Chitra-Yavanika* would be far better aesthetically. This could be done quietly, efficiently and swiftly while Dusyanta did the *Abhinaya* of watching them thus keeping the audience engaged.

There are two other entries behind the *Chitra-Yavanika* which to my mind are of a remarkable nature. One is when Sakuntala was getting ready to leave the Asrama to go to Hastinapura. Anasuya and Priyamvada saw her from a distance and Priyamvada described the situation "She had her full bath and now is being blessed by the *Tapasis* with स्वस्तिकवचन etc. and then entered Sakuntala "seated" as described in Act IV (ततः प्रविशति यथोद्दिष्ट व्यापारासनस्था शकुंतला).

Here it is quite obvious that the same device of the *Chitra-Yavanika*

was used. But what is remarkable and different from the last stage-directions is the specific effect that was sought to be created. Here, after describing the situation Anasuya and Priyamvada began walking towards the scene and at the same time the scene itself comes towards them thus creating an effect, and this is unusually impressive of the scene as if arranged on a revolving stage. This simultaneous movement of two different groups of characters moving in opposite directions can only be possible on a modern stage with the help of a revolving stage, which on the classical stage was so simply achieved!

Yet another example of such a stage-direction is to be found in Act VII. Here the king, Sakuntala, Matali etc., as the stage-direction said, were moving about (सर्वे परिक्रामन्ति) on the stage to indicate their going to the Rsi Maricha as Matali had said that he was ready to see them now. While they were doing the *Parikrama* on the stage to go to meet the Rsi, immediate and the next stage-direction described the entry of Aditi with Maricha seated on an *Asana* (ततः प्रविश्यत्यादित्या सार्धमासनस्थो मारीचः).

This again had an effect of creating a scene as if arranged on a revolve. On a turn-table where such an effect is to be created, one set of characters would move on the stage floor itself and the turn-table or the revolving stage would move in an opposite direction thus both moving in opposite directions to meet at a particular area. The present stage-direction also achieved exactly the same effect. With a simple piece of cloth of variegated colours what an amazing effect was created! It eliminated the time lag during the change in scene and yet kept up the continuity of movement and action on the stage and at the same time the attention of the audience was held by what was going on the stage.

Seeing to the effects which could be achieved by the *Chitra-Yavanika*, such as the switching off of the scene, as it were and revelation as if by sudden switching on of the lights, I am inclined to believe that, it might also have been used to aid Sanumati, the *Apsara* who enters by an aerial path in her movement of descending on earth. Along with her aerial movement used for such an action, the curtain too might have been raised and lowered slowly to fall and then pulled aside and out to leave Sanumati free for her action (Act VI). At this time there is no other character on the stage and only after her monologue, the *Chetis* enter. The stage thus was left-free for her aerial descending action. The entry of the king riding a chariot in the sky and Matali driving it, might also have been reinforced by the subtle manipulation of the *Chitra-Yavanika* (Act VII).*

These three curtains, *Pati*, *Yavanika* and the *Chitra-Yavanika* were all

* I have seen the remarkable use of this curtain for similar action in the contemporary ballet based on *Ramayana* staged under the direction of the late Shanti Bardhan of the Little Ballet Troupe.

the equipment that was needed on the classical Sanskrit stage which left a great deal to the imagination of the audience.

Some of these interpretations here might seem arbitrary or far-fetched to the uninitiated and the novice in the theatre, particularly of the classical Sanskrit theatre. But one has only to look at the *NS* to be convinced. Tremendous care has been shown in the text with regard to *Abhinaya* in the mention of subtle movements of the various limbs of the body, eye-brows, eyelids etc. nuances of musical notes, subtleties in the use of speech, costume, make-up etc.. If all these various elements had received such intense care, there is no reason to believe that similar care could not have been taken during the production of the plays. And any production worth its name, did not only mean what was going on on the stage alone but all the other silent backstage activities which could make or mar it. Just as one could expect a *Sutradhara* to be conscious of the greatness of a play like *Sakuntala*, he could also be expected to produce the play equally with great care taking into consideration all the various elements that go with a successful production. To be convinced of this, one has only to look at the varied and subtle manner in which the simple colourful piece of cloth variously called *There* or *Parade* in *Yaksagana*, *Thirsila* in *Kathakali* and *Krsnattam* etc. is used in our existing traditional dramatic forms.

And one cannot ignore the eastern traditional dramatic forms like the *Noh* and the *Kabuki* of Japan in which also the curtains are manipulated to create varied moods. A study of other south-east Asian traditional dance-drama forms might also perhaps reveal the similar use of curtains.

And one should not forget that all these Asian forms were influenced by, or had borrowed directly from the classical dramatic tradition of India in the remote past.*

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