## Nemi Chandra Jain

LAST YEAR, A BHASA MAHOTSAVA was held at Trivandrum to celebrate the discovery of Bhasa plays 75 years ago. It certainly was a great occasion for our culture, particularly for our theatre. But there is also an element of irony in it that these exquisite and unique dramatic creations were inaccessible to us until about eight decades back. It is also a rather sad commentary on the distorted, in fact twisted, growth of our theatre and its situation in its modern phase, that even after their discovery, the Bhasa plays had some stray productions in the fifties and began to be seriously staged only during the last decade.

In a way, this was probably inevitable, since Sanskrit drama lost its central place after 10th-11th century, and the theatre activity shifted away from the Sanskrit to the modern Indian languages in various regions of the country. During the next seven-eight centuries, plays were undoubtedly written or staged in Sanskrit, and were sometimes also translated into the regional languages. But that was more of a literary exercise without much relevance for the theatrical practice.

As a result, the continuity of Sanskrit play production was irretrievably disrupted and the Sanskrit theatre tradition and its various practices were gradually lost, except to some extent in Kudiattam of Kerala. But there also the Sanskrit plays began to be heavily overlaid with the Vidushaka's long comments and eleborations in Malayalam. While this innovation may have brought a new stylistic flavour, imaginative quality and popular appeal to the Kudiattam performances, the Sanskrit theatre practices were robably further diluted and distanced from the Natyashastra tradition.

After our encounter with the western theatre in the 19th century, this process of alienation acquired an altogether new dimension. A different kind of theatre emerged and spread in our old urban or new industrial and commercial centres all over the country. It was modelled on western aesthetic principles, leading to a different kind of dramatic writing and theatrical presentations, which pushed away even our traditional theatres in the regions to sidelines in the countryside.

Ironically enough, some Sanskrit plays were now discovered for us by the western scholars while tracing the Indian political, social and cultural history often in pursuit of their explicit or covert imperialist, colonial objectives. Inevitably, they compared the Rasa-oriented Sanskrit dramas to the conflict-based western plays and declared them as no drama at all, only dramatic poems and hence unsuitable for the theatre. In fact, for almost a century, the knowledge of the Sanskrit plays was confined only to orientalists and scholars, who sometimes translated Kalidasa's Abhijnan Shakuntala into modern Indian languages primarily for literary purposes.

In the absence of any recognisable active tradition of Sanskrit theatre in the country, occasional attempts to stage Sanskrit plays, mainly of Kalidasa or Bhavabhuti, in more or less western semi-realistic or Shakespearean style, could not, naturally, be very successful in providing a satisfying theatre experience. This only further confirmed the assessment of the western scholars and was accepted also by the new English-educated Indian intelligentsia.

After Independence, when a new generation of creative people appeared on our theatre scene, some of them, like Habib Tanvir, were vaguely attracted towards Sanskrit drama, but did not quite know how to go about it. Hardly any one of them knew Sanskrit, and good stageable translations even of relatively known plays like Abhijnan Shakuntala and Mricchakatika, or of Natyashastra and other books on Sanskrit dramaturgy, were just not available in most of the Indian languages. There was thus a near-total unfamiliarity among theatre people with the Sanskrit dramatic literature, theatrical practices, usages, conventions, as well as Sanskrit aesthetics. No wonder even the existence of the plays of Bhasa was not known except to a very small cognoscenti, the question of staging them just could not arise.

The first performance of a Bhasa play that I saw in Delhi was in 1956. It was of Swapnavasavadatta in Hindi, directed by H.V. Gupte, and presented by the Song and Drama Division of the Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, Government of India. Staged on the broad open-air Talkatora Garden theatre, in the more or less mixed heroic-realistic style, typical of the earlier Marathi theatre, it attracted attention as much because of some restrained acting by the performers as the freshness of the play itself.

The next, also the first major, attempt to stage a Bhasa play came almost eight years after, in 1964, when Shanta Gandhi produced Madhyamavyayoga, in Hindi again, with the students of the National School of Drama in Delhi, where she was teaching Sanskrit Theatre. With her earlier experience of constructing a wooden model of the Vikrishta Madhyam Natyamandapa according to Natyashastra, and her active involvement in the traditional theatre forms, she attemp-

ted now to explore various processes for authentically presenting a Sanskrit play to modern audiences.

In her production of Madhyamavyayoga, though staged in the small Studio Theatre in Rabindra Bhavan, she tried to create a feel of the Sanskrita Ranga, of Rangapitha, Rangashirsha, Mattavarini, etc. There was an elaborate Poorvaranga with music and dance, and in the main play also a judicious interplay of different rasas in the text, a careful mix of the Natyadharmi and Lokadharmi, using rhythmic movement, mime, prose and recitative verse dialogue, straight and mask-like make-up and so on. Since it was an exercise for the trainees, the main emphasis was, naturally, on understanding the staging methods and conventions outlined in the Natyashastra in relation to the play. But it was also, undoubtedly, a satisfying artistic theatre experience even for the ordinary spectators. It is a pity the Drama School could not continue this exploration further and the next Sanskrit play was produced there almost after a decade.

But Shanta Gandhi, though she left the Drama School subsequently, retained her interest in the Sanskrit theatre, specially in Bhasa. Her next Bhasa production was of Swapnavasavadatta in Honolulu in the Asian Programme of the Hawaii University. This time it was in English, though she tried to get a faithful translation, approximating even the metres of the original. Since the resources problem was comparatively easier here, she managed as close a reconstruction as possible of the Natyashastra stage.

In her interpretation of the play, she says, she emphasised Veera Rasa (Karmaveera, Dharmaveera) keeping the Vipralambha Shrinagar as secondary. The treatment was mainly Natyadharmi, using dance-like movements, music and recitation in speech. Though the work again was with trainees, this time further away, physically as well as culturally, from the milieu of the play, she found the experience rewarding.

Meanwhile, a momentous development of immense significance for the revival of Sanskrit theatre had taken place in the country. The Kalidasa Festival at Ujjain which since its inception in 1957 had been mainly concerned with academic work, including routine productions of some Sanskrit plays, was reorganised in 1974 to seek active cooperation of serious theatre people from all parts of the country. In many cases, eminent directors were invited to produce a Sanskrit play in the original or in any modern Indian language at Ujjain, or with their own troupe and bring it to the annual Kalidasa Festival. The organisers made available reasonably adequate funds also for the purpose.

The impact of this step was almost electrifying for the promotion

and stimulation of interest in the Sanskrit theatre. In fact, this led to numerous productions of many Sanskrit plays, rarely attempted so far at least in the mainstream theatre of the country. It was particularly so for Bhasa plays. It was at the instance of the Kalidasa Festival that Kavalam Narayana Panikkar agreed to undertake his now widely acclaimed production of Madhyamavyayoga, in 1980 Subsequently, not only did he produce Dootavakya for them at Ujjain, but he also further extended his interest in Bhasa and produced Urubhanga in Hindi with the students of National School of Drama in 1983, and Karnabhara in Sanskrit recently with his own troup. The Kalidasa Festival thus became catalytic for Bhasa plays being taken up by a number of directors and troupes, including Ratan Kumar Thiyam, M.K. Raina and others, some of whose work is being discussed later.

Another notable event was a Bhasa Festival organised by the Madhya Pradesh Natak Lok Kala Academi at Ujjain in 1980 in which six plays were staged—Dootavakya in Sanskrit by Shrinivas Rath, Swapanvasavadatta, Madhyamavyayoga, Dootaghatotkacha and Karnabhara in Hindi by M.K. Raina and Urubhanga in Hindi by Raj Kumud.

Among productions by many other directors which can be mentioned here are Madhyamavyayoga in Sanskrit by Radha Vallabh Tripathi in 1974 at Sagar, Pratima in Sanskrit in 1978 and Karnabhara in Hindi in 1986 by Prabhat Kumar Bhattacharya at Ujjain, Dootavakya and Karnabhara, both in Sanskrit, in 1985 and 1986 respectively, by Rajendra Upadhyaya at Varanasi, Dootavakya in Hindi by Balraj Pandi in 1976 and Swapnavasavadatta in Hindi by Nadira Zaheer Babbar in 1978, both at Delhi, Swapnavasavadatta in Malavi by Shrinivas Rath and Sanjeev Dixit in 1981 at Ujjain and a composite production entitled Duryodhana comprising of Pancharatra, Dootavakya and Urubhanga in Chhattisgarhi by Habib Tanvir in 1979.

There are in fact many more as will be seen from the appendix, but it is not necessary to go into this enumeration further. It is evident that Bhasa plays have captured the imagination of many contemporary directors who have discovered in them unlimited possibilities for innovative theatrical treatment in varying styles and idioms.

This is more than borne out from the work of some of the well-known directors. For instance, Kavalam Narayana Panikkar, in his production of *Madhyamavyayoga*, has attempted to explore, apart from the 'basic human feelings with all its blemishes, frailities, prejudices, partialities' etc., a deeper meaning of 'madyamatra' or

the 'middleness' and the 'tritva' or the 'threeness' in the play. This reveals a very significant philosophical dimension not only of Bhasa's work but also of the director's approach to the theatre.

Similarly, his orchestration of 'Karuna', 'Hasya', 'Veera' and 'Shringar', with sympathy, irony and insight, his treatment of various emotional or structural motifs, his use of rhythm in controlling both Angika and Vachika, the movement and speech—these and a number of other elements have made his production of Madhyamavyayoga a memorable theatre experience. It is interesting to find him varying the inner relationship and treatment of these elements in his two versions of this play in 1980 and then again in 1987.

In Karnabhara (1984), on the other hand, Panikkar created from a very short text of the play, a two-hour absorbing theatre, showing a great warrior, endowed with Supreme human qualities, torn by a shattering inner conflict right at the battle-field. It was a unique enactment of, to use his own words, 'the eternal interactions of the elements of Nature', 'an endless story in which the indomitable will of man struggles for his ultimate liberation.' A classic, thus, became truly contemporary. Visually, the miming of animals in the flashback sequence with Indra disguised as a Brahmin, the use of small cymbals as weapons in the battle-field scene and many other elements were handled with a fascinating theatrical imagination.

In his production of *Urubhanga* in Hindi (1983) with the students of the National School of Drama at Delhi (also produced by him in Sanskrit at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, Chicago in 1985), he not only underlined the meaninglessness of war, but also related it to the inner conflict of Suyodhana. He created three different images of Suyodhana—as a representative of the Kaurava might, as an ordinary human being tormented at the moment of his death by his own ego and failures in life, and the third, as his conscience or soul in the form of a Theyyam realising and contemplating the pointlessness of war.

Urubhanga has a long narrative Vishkambhaka. Panikkar gave an inventive visual form to some of its descriptive verses. As a result, the various individual and group combats, divine nymphs welcoming the dead heroes, or vultures descending upon their dead bodies, and above all, the final duel between Suyodhana and Bhima became theatrically very vibrant, exciting and gripping.

It is understandable that *Urubhanga* is one of the most popular of Bhasa's plays and has been produced by a number of directors with imaginative variations in emphasis in its meaning, formal innovations and visual treatment. Ratan Kumar Thiyam in his production

of the play in Manipuri in 1981 which was later also staged at the Kalidasa Festival, suggested a close parallel with contemporary polictical situation in which there is very little truth on any side. The three soldiers were almost like present day camp-followers who blindly glorify their own leaders. His Suyodhana was a sort of tragic figure who failed to achieve what he sought and ultimately persons like Ashwatthama took over.

He made a very creative use of the rich traditions of Manipuri dance and movement, tunes and musical instruments, colours and designs in costumes and stage properties etc. The performance was inventively choreographed and had a fascinating lyrical quality, making it an unforgettable and moving theatrical experience.

Shanta Gandhi produced *Urubhanga* both in Sanskrit and Hindi in 1979 at Ujjain. Both were staged on the same evening, one after another, the Sanskrit version followed by the Hindi one with a specially written Prastavana in Hindi to link them together. The Poorvaranga was only in the Sanskrit version with rhythm-controlled movement and recitation of the verses. In Hindi, both the movement and speech were straight without the use of rhythm or recitation. The general theme of both was the meaninglessness of war, but in Hindi the three warriors of the Vishkambhaka were made representatives of the three main political trends of contemporary times—a radical, a religious fanatic and a supporter of the establishment. They were identified by different suggestive bands on their head-dresses, and the entire Hindi production was in modern costumes with some use of masks also.

The Hindi version of *Urubhanga* by M.K. Raina at Bhopal in 1976 was expressive and moving even without such boldness and inventiveness in form and style. He emphasized the horrors of war and the resulting pathos of the situation, and created an atmosphere of the battlefield by a careful and well-designed choreography of the movements of the three warriors.

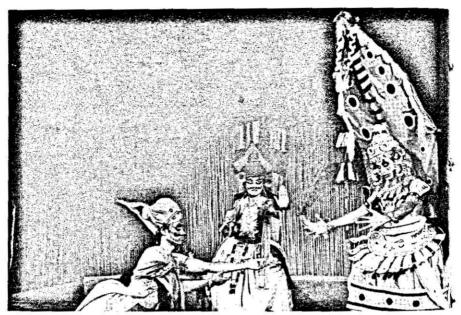
Raina's productions of other plays in the Bhasa Festival at Ujjain in 1980 also had interesting variations of emphasis and treatment. In his Madhyamavyayoga, he underlined the Vatsalya or parental love in the Brahmin family as well as between Bhima and Ghatotkacha. In Swapnavasavadatta he made the Vidushaka and Yaugandharayana the central characters and Hasya as the main note ridiculing the consequences of the actions of a weak ruler. In Dootaghatotkacha he underlined Veera and in Karnabhara the Karuna Rasas.

In Swapnavasavadatta and Madhyamavyayoga he attempted to use the elements of folk musical performances in movements, mime, speech, songs, etc., with brief Poorvaranga based on Kathak dance

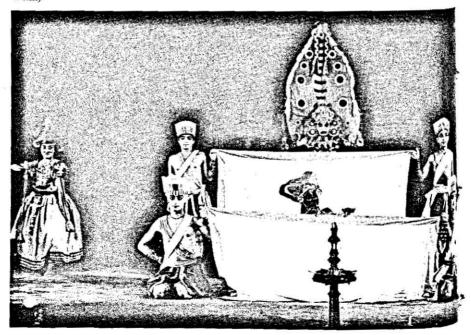




Scenes from the play Karnabharam directed by K.N. Panikkar (Photos courtesy K.N. Panikkar).

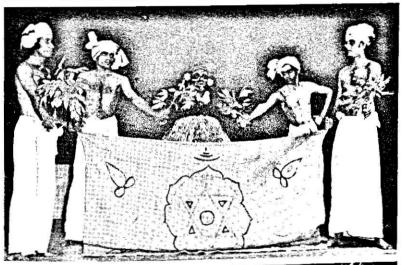


Scenes from the play Urubhangam directed by Jayarajan. (Photos courtesy National School of Das Delhi)





Scenes from the play Madyamavyayoga directed by K.N. Panikkar.

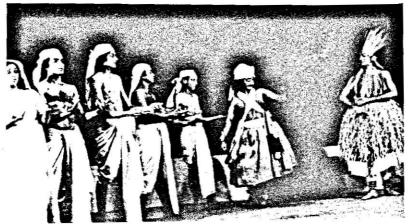






Scenes from the play Madyamavyayoga directed by K.N. Panikkar.





and classical music. On the other hand, *Dootaghatotkacha* and *Karnabhara* were comparatively more formal. In the former, the chorus recited the verses and main characters entered behind a Rangapati held by two stagehands. *Karnabhara* was more like a long, static monologue with only the Karna-Indra sequence enacted as a flashback.

Such variations in interpretation and use of formal devices are noticeable in most other productions also. But even this very rapid survey of a few major productions of some of the eminent directors establishes beyond doubt the great significance of Bhasa plays for the modern theatre. More and more of our perceptive directors are becoming aware of the most unexpected theatrical riches in Bhasa, probably more than any other sanskrit dramatist. Not only is there such a large number of them to choose from, they also offer a staggering variety of forms and styles. Even from a purely academic point of view, he alone provides examples of so many Sanskrit Roopakas—Natak, Vyayoga, Anka, Veethi, probably Samavakara and Prakarana, Natika and also one or two which cannot be identified.

But beyond these academic classifications, for the theatre people the Bhasa plays are important for their unique, unorthodox vision, limitless scope for different interpretations of meaning, and for free play of theatrical imagination. The thematic material in Bhasa comes from both *Mahabharata* and *Ramayana* as well as from Akhyanas and legends; it is also both Prakhyat and Utpadya, i.e. well known and imaginary. He reveals many new insights into the personalities and relationships of even the most familiar mythological characters and often he places the personal desires and predicaments of individuals in bigger social, political or even philosophical frames and perspectives.

It is no exaggeration to say that Bhasa in his various plays has something or the other to offer to every theatre practitioner and enthusiast—playwright, director, actor, and the spectator. His plays have a great diversity and flexibility of structure, with inventive devices to advance or intensify the dramatic action. His treatment of many episodes and situations has that directness and the individual touch of the singer-narrator, and it would seem that the story-telling or ballad-singing tradition was very live and powerful in his time. Here are some very important features for the modern playwright to draw upon.

Bhasa plays are the most outstanding examples of what K.N. Panikkar calls the 'minimal script', which offers fantastic unfettered opportunities for the creative imagination of the director, as he and

many others have more than demonstrated in their work. To the actor, the Bhasa plays present not only a great challenge, but also the limitless possibilities for the creative exploration of his own talent and potential. This has become evident again and again in many modern productions, but more than that in the work of the great Chakyar masters, some of whom are regaling us with their creations of great beauty and insight on a number of occasions.

In the end, it can be said that Bhasa plays have brought some of the finest and most cherishable theatre experience to spectators during the last one decade or more, which I can personally vouchsafe as an humble spectator myself. It was, therefore, an event of very great significance for the Indian theatre that this Bhasa Mahotsava was organised to enable us all to pay our tributes to the great master.

### Appendix I Contemporary Productions of Bhasa Plays

1956

Swapnavasavadatta (Hindi)—Song & Drama Division, Govt. of India, New Delhi, directed by H.V. Gupte

1964

Swapnavasavadatta (English)—The Institute of Advanced Studies in Theatre Arts, New York, directed by Mrinalini Sarabhai

Madhyamavyayoga (Hindi)—National School of Drama, New Delhi, directed by Shanta Gandhi

1968

Madhyamavyayoga (Sanskrit)—Harinam Pradayini Sabha, Varanasi Dootaghatotkacha (Sanskrit)—Harinam Pradayini Sabha, Varanasi

1974

Swapnavasavadatta (English)—Asian Studies Centre, University of Hawaii, Honolulu (USA), directed by Shanta Gandhi

Madhyamavyayoga (Sanskrit)—Natya Parishad, Sanskrit Department, Sagar University, Sagar (M.P.), directed by Radha Vallabh Tripathi

1976

Dootavakya (Hindi)-Little Theatre Group, New Delhi, directed by Balraj Pandit

Urubhanga (Hindi)-Rangashivir, Bhopal, directed by M.K. Raina

1977

Avimaraka (Hindi)-Rangaprabhat, Ujjain, directed by M.K. Raina

1978

Swapnavasavadatta (Hindi, under the title Raja ka Sapna)—Agredoot, New Delhi, directed by Nadira Zaheer Babbar

Pratima (Sanskrit)—M.P. Natak Lok Kala Academy, Ujjain, directed by Prabhat Kumar Bhattacharya

1979

Pancharatra, Dootavakya, Urubhanga (Chhattisgarhi-all three under the title Duryodhana)—Naya Theatre, New Delhi, directed by Habib Tanvir

Balacharita (Hindi)-M.P. Natak Lok Kala Academy, Ujjain, directed by Ravi Sharma

Urubhanga (Sanskrit and Hindi)—Kalidas Akademi, Ujjain, directed by Shanta Gandhi

1980

Madhyamavyayoga (Sanskrit)—Thiruvarang, Trivandrum, directed by Kavalam Narayana Panikkar

Dootavakya (Sanskrit)—Kalidas Akademi, Ujjain, directed by Kavalam Narayana Panikkar

Karnabhara (Sanskrit)—Balodyan, Bombay, directed by Shanta Gandhi

Swapnavasavadatta (Hindi)—M.P.Natak Lok Kala Academy, Ujjain, directed by M.K.Raina

Madhyamavyayoga (Hindi)—M.P. Natak Lok Kala Academy, Ujjain, directed by M.K. Raina

Dootaghatotkacha (Hindi)—M.P. Natak Lok Kala Academy, Ujjain, directed by M.K.Raina

Dootavakya (Sanskrit)—M.P. Natak Lok Kala Academy, Ujjain, directed by Shrinivas Rath

Urubhanga (Hindi)—M.P. Natak Lok Kala Academy, Ujjain, directed by Raj Kumud

1981

Karnabhara (Sanskrit)—Kalidas Akademi, Ujjain, dircted by Dhirendra Kumar

Urubhanga (Manipuri)—Chorus Repertory Theatre, Imphal, directed by Ratan Kumar Thiyam

Swapnavasavadatta (Malavi, titled Sapna Mein Rani)—Kalidas Akademi, Ujjain, directed by Shrinivas Rath/Sanjeev Dixit

1983

Urubhanga (Hindi)—National School of Drama, New Delhi, directed by Kavalam Narayana Panikkar

#### 1984

Karnabhara (Sanskrit)—Sopanam, Trivandrum, directed by Kavalam Narayana Panikkar

### 1985

- Dootavakya (Sanskrit)—Abhinaya Bharati, Varanasi, directed by Rajendra Upadhyaya
- Swapnavasavadatta (Hindi-titled Raja Ka Sapna)—Theatre Circle, New Delhi, directed by Ramesh Manchanda
- Pratima (Sanskrit, together with Uttar Rama Charit, titled Pratimottara)—M.P. Natak Lok Kala Academy, Ujjain, directed by Prabhat Kumar Bhattacharya
- Urubhanga (Sanskrit)—University of Wisconsin-Madison, Chicago (USA), directed by Kavalam Narayana Panikkar/Phillip B. Zarilli

#### 1986

- Karnabhara (Hindi)---M.P. Natak Lok Kala Academy, Ujjain, directed by Prabhat Kumar Bhattacharya
- Karnabhara (Sanskrit)—Abhinaya Bharati, Varanasi, directed by Rajendra Upadhyaya

#### 1987

Madhyamavyayoga (Sanskrit-new production)—Sopanam, Trivandrum, directed by Kavalam Narayana Panikkar

### Appendix 2

# Contemporary Productions of Bhasa - Plays

Avimaraka	*	
Hindi-M.K. Raina		1977
Balacharita		15
Hindi - Ravi Sharma	360	1979
Dootaghatotkacha		
Sanskrit - Harinam		1968
Pradayini Sabha		1000
Hindi - M.K. Raina		1980
Dootavakya	e .	
Hindi - Balraj Pandit	28	1976
Chhattisgarhi - Habib Tanvir		1979
Sanskrit - Kavalam Narayana		1980
Panikkar		
Sanskrit - Shrinivas Rath		1980
Sanskrit - Rajendra Upadhyaya		1985
Karnabhara		
Sanskrit - Shanta Gandhi		1980
Hindi - M.K. Raina	€	1980

CONTEMPORARY PRODUCTIONS OF BHASA PLAYS	35	
CONTEST ON THE PRODUCTIONS OF DIFFICILLY	33	
Sanskrit - Dhirendra Kumar	1981	
Sanskrit - K.N. Panikkar	1984	
Sanskrit - Rajendra Upadhyaya	1986	
Hindi - Prabhat Kumar	1986	
Bhattacharya	1134	
Madhyamavyayoga		
Sanskrit - Harinam Pradayini	1968	
Sabha	2022	
Hindi - Shanta Gandhi	1973	
Sanskrit - Radha Vallabh	1974	
Tripathi		
Sanskrit - K.N. Panikkar	1980	
Hindi - M.K. Raina	1980	
Sanskrit - K.N. Panikkar	1987	
Pancharatra		
Chhattisgarhi - Habib Tanvir	1979	
Pratima		
Sanskrit - Prabhat Kumar	1978	
Bhattacharya		
Sanskrit - Prabhat Kumar	1985	
Bhattacharya	(With Uttarramcharita)	
Swapnavasavadatta	*	
Hindi - H.V. Gupte	1956	
English - Mrinalini Sarabhai	1964	
English - Shanta Gandhi	1974	
Hindi - Nadira Zaheer Babbar	1978	
Hindi - M.K. Raina	1980	
Malavi - Shrinivas Rath/	1981	
Sanjeev Dixit		
Hindi - Ramesh Manchanda	1985	
Urubhanga		
Hindi - M.K. Raina	1976	
Sanskrit - Shanta Gandhi	1979	
Hindi - Shanta Gandhi	1979	
Chattisgarhi - Habib Tanvir	1979	
Hindi - Raj Kumud	1980	
Manipuri - Ratan Kumar Thiyam	1981	
Hindi - K.N. Panikkar	1983	
Sanskrit - K.N. Panikkar	1985	
Appendix 3		
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Contemporary Productions of Bhasa - Directors		
Babbar, Nadira Zaheer		
Swapnavasavadatta (Hindi)	1978	
Bhattacharya, Prabhat Kumar	arae=	
Pratima (Sanskrit)	1978	
Pratima (Sanskrit - together	1985	
with Uttararamcharita)	***	
Karnabhara (Hindi)	1986	

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