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THE HINDI LITERARY SCENE – A STUDY OF *SKANDGUPTA* AND *ASHOKA*

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ABSTRACT

The article *entitled* “The Hindi Literary scene-A study of *Skandguta* and *Ashok*” focuses on two plays by two different playwrights in Hindi. Both the playwrights had put their emphases on nationality, humanity, charity, enduring patience, tolerance, forgiveness and respect towards national culture and political values. The plays underline the spirit that, though this country is being ruled and controlled by others (Britishers), still the morale of the countrymen shall never let down, rather it would become stronger and stronger. *Skandgupta* and *Ashok* are in themselves a message for the country to live together, spread love and devotion.

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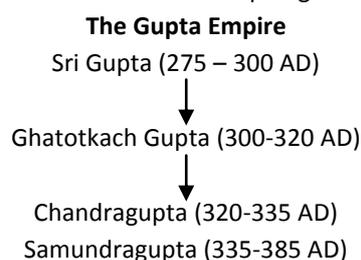
To start with, let us first talk about Skandgupta *Skandgupta* (1928) the play we study here is regarded as Prasad’s most powerful play in which his dexterity in handling the plot “has few parallels.” The play is named after the Gupta King Skandgupta, who tried actually to stem the march of the Huns into India. The hero faces the rebellion of his stepmother, Anantdevi, assisted by Bhatark and Prapanchbuddhi. He fights, at least, three battles besides having to bear the brunt of many domestic conflicts. The play is indeed a plethora of conflicts – domestic, political, social and religious. In this play, “the concept of tragedy introduced into Hindi drama by Bhartendu was given another dimension by Prasad where the hero in his final victory suffers from his personal tragedy.”¹

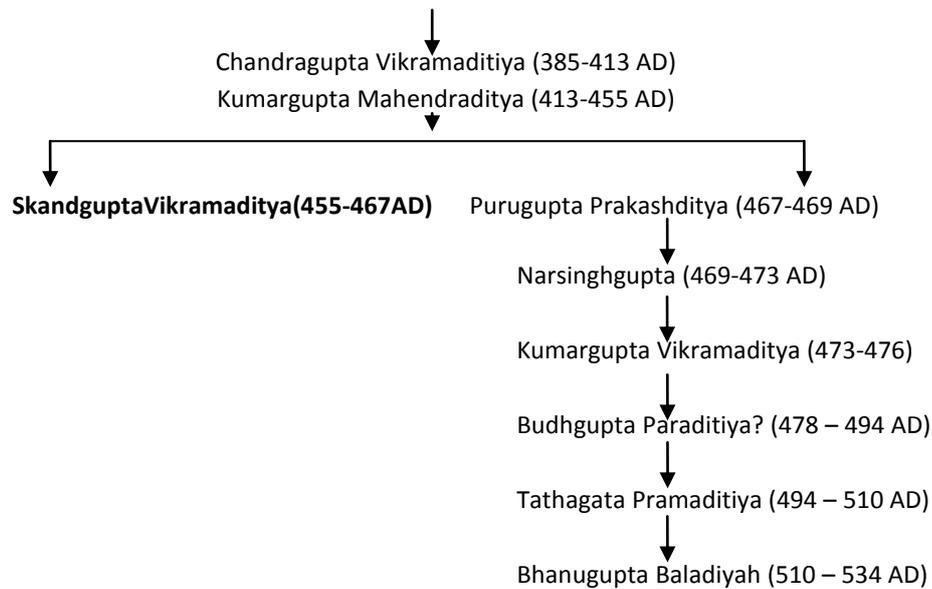
To understand the play *Skandgupta* better, we need to know about Skandgupta – the emperor.

Skandgupta – The Emperor

The exact origins of the Guptas are somewhat shadowy. But historians agree by inscriptions that the patriarch of the family was a Maharaja of the Brahmin class named Sri Gupta, who lived sometime around 300 A.D. Gupta himself was not a great monarch, but he was a prominent landowner. His son was one Ghatotkacha, another Maharaja, whose importance to history rests mainly with the fact that he was the father of Chandragupta I, the founder of the Gupta Empire and the first of its great rulers.

The Golden Age genealogy of the Gupta Empire goes as follows:





Skandagupta (455-467 AD) was an emperor of Gupta Empire. Skandagupta ascended the throne after his father's death (Kumaragupta) in 455 A.D. History tells us that he had, at least, two brothers, Ghatotkachagupta, and Purugupta. His step-brother Purugupta, the son of Queen Anantdevi, was his rival. There was strife within the Gupta family itself, amounting to contending claims to the throne. Therefore, there ensued a civil war between them for the succession to the throne. Details of the struggle are scant, but the last of the five inscriptions dedicated to Skandagupta dated 466 A.D. shows that his rule lasted 20 years. Finally, the defiant & wise Skandagupta became the successor of Kumaragupta. Ghatotkacha probably died during the lifetime of Skandagupta, but Pura Gupta survived him and later succeeded him, as Skandagupta died without any issue and therefore, his step brother Purugupta ascended the throne after his death in 467 A.D. The relationship between Skandagupta and Purugupta was never cordial which is evident from:

...the Bhitari seal which provides the name of Pura Gupta and his genealogy omits the name of Skandagupta. This glaring omission of the name of such a great kingdom from the old list by the grandson of Skandagupta's brother Pura Gupta shows that the relation between Pura Gupta and Skandagupta was none too cordial, and this

Vajragupta Prakataditya (534 – 540 AD)

hostile feeling was shared by the princes of the Pura Gupta line. It suggests that there was a war of rivalry between the two brothers or half-brothers. It is probable that one or both the brothers of Skandagupta contested the throne against him after his father's death. There is no doubt that Skandagupta, being the ablest of the sons, was his father's favourite and was put in command of the imperial army to fight the Pushyamitra. Line 12 of the Bhitari Pillar Inscription suggests that his father died when he was fighting the Pushyamitras and was away from the capital. His father's death and his absence from the capital gave his internal enemies, possibly his rival brother, the opportunity to rise against their father's nominee to the throne. Line 13 and 14 of the inscription show that when he returned to the palace after his victories over the enemies he found his mother weeping and in distress.²

Skandagupta was considered to be an honest and dedicated monarch of his kingdom. He was very brave and also assumed the title 'Kramaditya' during his reign. The White Huns or Hephthalites or Hunas, the tribal people of China, attacked almost all the Indian States. They also attacked Skandagupta. They fought him but were finally defeated by him. In fact, their invasion by Skandagupta led them not to face

India for another fifty years. But unfortunately, the Gupta Empire could not survive for long due to its internal conflicts.

In spite of this tragic repercussion, this period is everlastingly renowned as the 'Golden Age' of India. It is because it spread cultural innovation in its kingdom, like painting, sculpture, architecture, carving, etc. The Ajanta Caves located in central Deccan and its walls' paintings are among the most beautiful art of India. These pictures were designed to represent the Buddha & his life. The rock temple at Elephanta in the state Maharashtra has an incredible art devised in the Golden period. There is an eighteen-foot statue of the three-headed Shiva. Three heads represent three roles of Shiva: Creation, Preservation, and Destruction. Many Hindu temples of this period are the preserves of the remarkable art - Vaishnavite Tagawa temple at Jabalpur is one of the famous temples in this period & survives as an artistic culture. It was the period of the revival of sacrificial worships and construction of altars and the finding of auspicious moments for sacrifices which led to the study of astronomy and mathematics and Th also the time when Aryabhata (born in 476 AD.) invented zero. *Panchatantra* and *Kamasutra* the famous works ruled this period and had enshrined forever till today.

Skandgupta himself, as "has been described in the Allahabad inscription was a gifted poet and musician. The number of intellectual celebrities flourished in this favourable atmosphere. Tradition associates the nine gems (Nava Ratna) with the Vikramaditya of Ujjain. There is no doubt that in the Gupta court gathered a coterie of which the shining light was the famous Kalidas, who wrote some such excellent dramas like the *Sakuntala*, *Malavikagnimitram*, *Vikramorvasi*, epics like *Raghuvamsa*, and lyric poetry like *Ritu-Samhara* and *Meghaduta*". However, the Gupta reign which started from Sri Gupta began to disintegrate and until the middle of the 6th century AD, the generations that followed merely became 'petty chiefs'³.

Jayshankar Prasad's 'Skandgupta.'

Skandgupta is the result of Prasad's meticulous reading, inter alia, history of India by Smith, history of Jaisalmer, accounts by Chinese pilgrim Hue Tsang, Banbhatt, inscriptions on Skandgupta the ruler, epics like *Kathasaritsagar*, Durga Prasad's *Ramcharit*, *Abhigyan Shakuntlam*, *Harshcharit*, Kalhan's *Rajtirangini*, *Raghuwansh*, *Meghdoot* and *Setubandh* etc.

In the introduction to *Skandgupta*, while talking about the authenticity of 'history', Prasad admits: "*Paatron ki aihaskita ke virudh charitra ki srishti, Jahan tak sambhav ho saka, nahi hone di gayee hai. Phir bhikalpana ka avlambhlena hi pada hai, kewalghatna ki paramparatheekkarnekeeliye*"⁴ (Deviation from the point of view of characterization as per the authenticity of history has not been thoroughly done. Even then some imagination had to be involved but that too, only to set things right as per the dramatic needs.)¹

Ram Prasad Mishra in his criticism on the historicity of *Skandgupta*, writes: "*yeh theek hai ki unki bhavukta yatra-tatra itihaas ko aachadit karne lagti ha, kintu ve adhik aniyantrit nahi hote, itihaas ko vikrit karne ka prayatan nahi karte...saamyik itihaas ka abhiyaantar sarvatha surikshit roop main chitrit kiya gaya hai (grah-kaleh evam hun aakraman gupt vansh ke patan ke pradhaan karan the aur naatak mein inki vyapti santhoshjanak hai...)*"⁴ (It is true that sometimes his emotions leave his imprints, but he seldom distorts and deviates from history... The presentation of history is truly 'true'. He had satisfactorily presented the truth of Huns being the main reason for the downfall of Gupta's generations.)

The play starts with the invasion of Huns in 455 AD and ends with the last invasion of Huns in 466 AD. Except few, all the historical events depicted in the play are historical and the characters

¹ All the English translations of the Hindi Plays that follow in this chapter are mine.

(Does this world have any objective? This earth has to be 'heaven' in itself. It is the heavenly order that 'Deities' will reside here. Why should I not then obey 'Him', Vijaya? I am nobody. I just have to be prepared to stand against those people who spread 'tyranny'. I do not have enemies because I have no 'worldly desires'. There is some divine power working within this nation which knows how to balance the equilibrium of 'nature'. I am just a part of...)

too except Mudgal, Prapanchbuddhi, Jamal, Devsena, Rama, Kamla, Vijaya and Malini all are valid. Prasad has incorporated a couple of love episodes to make the play more readable.

The play revolves around Skandgupta. Skandgupta right from the beginning till the end is shown engulfed with internal domestic conflicts and external dangers as well. But he is shown to be brave enough to fight with evil in order to protect his kingdom and others as well:

Skandgupta: parantu is sansaar ka koi udeshay hai. Isi prithvi ko swarghonahai, isi par devtaon ka niwashoga; vishwav-niyanta ka esa hi udeshay mujhe vidith hotahai. Phir uskiicshakyonnapoornkaroon, vijaya! Mainkuchnahi hoon, uskaastrahoon – parmatama ka amodhastrahoon. Mujhe uskesanket par kewalatyachariyonkepratiprithonahai. Kisi semerishatrutanahi, kyonki meri nij ki koi iccha hi nahi. Deshvapi halchal ke bheetar koi shakti karya kar rahi hai, pavitra prakritik niyam apni raksha karne ke liye swyam sannadh hain. Mainusibhramchakra ka ek....
(*Skandgupta* V. ii, p.143.)

Prasad has elaborated Skandgupta's tedious life which was filled with betrayal on the one side and love on the other side. As for betrayal, it was his step mother, Anantdevi and his brother Purugupta. They had plans to betray him and succeed to the throne. Prasad has shown the vivid picture of this gigantic betrayal. When Skandgupta is busy making plans for the battlefield, he understands the conspiracy surrogated by Anantdevi against him. He says to Anantdevi in distraught:

Skandgupta: meri sautelimata! Is vijayseaapsukhihonghi. (My step-mother you must be happy at this victory)

Anantdevi: kyonlajjitkarteho, Skand! Tum bhi to mere putraho. (Why to embarrass me, Skand! You too are my son).

Skandgupta: aah! Yahi yadihota, meri vimata! To desh ki itnidurdasha Na hoti! (Had it been so, the nation would not have been in this state of affairs).

Anantdevi: mujhe shama karo, Samraat! (Forgive me)!

Skandgupta: Mata ka haridaysadeivshamya hai! Tumjispralobhanse is dushkarm main pravvat hui ho, wohi to kakeyinekiyatha. Tumhara ismeindoshnahi. Jab tumne aaj mujhe putra kaha to themain bhi tumhe mata hi samjhunga parantu Kumargupat ke is agnitej ko tum apne kutsit karmon ki raakh se dhak diya. Purugupta! (The heart of a mother is always 'pardonable'! The reasons for your 'ill-designs' are the same as of Kakeyi's. Today, when you called me your 'son,' I shall also take you to be my 'mother', but you have covered the malintensions of Purugupta beautifully).

Purugupta: Dev! Apraadh hua. (paerpakadta hai) (Please forgive me).

Skandgupta: Bhataark! Maine tumaharipratigyapoori ki. Lo, aaj is ranbhoomimein Purugupta ko yuvraajbanata hoon. Dhekhna, mere baadjanambhoomi ki dordashana ho. (rakthkateeka Purugupta ko lagata hai) (*Skandgupta* V. v. pp. 150-151). (I have fulfilled your 'will' Bhataark. I make, hereby, Purugupta 'Yuvraaj'. But see to it that the graph of the nation doesn't come down).

As for pure 'love' for Devsena, Prasad makes Skandgupta say:

Skandgupta: (aansooponchtahua) Utho, Devsena! Tumaharivijay hui! Aaj se main pratigyakartahoon ki main kumarjeevan hi vayateetkaroon. Meri jannani ki Samadhi is meinsaakshi hai. (*Skandgupta*. V. ii. pp. 141-142). (Awake Devsena, you have won. Today, I take an oath that I shall live the life of a 'bachelor' remaining my life. My dead mother is witness to it).

And at the same time, he is little bewildered also. He never understood what purpose he was born for. He knew only one thing, and that is to serve the nation with responsibility and dedication. He always desired for the serenity in his kingdom.

Skandgupta: bodhdon ka nirwan, yogiyon ki samadhi aur paglon ki-si sampuran vismriti mujhe ek saath chaiye! Chetna kehti hai ki tu raja hai, aur uttar mein jaise koi keheta

hai ki tu khilona hai – usi khilwadi vatpatrashaayi balak ke haaton ka khilona hai. Tera mukutshramjeve lo tokarisebhituchhai! Karuna – sahchar! Kya jis par kripahotihai, usi ko dookh ka amodhdaandete ho? Naath! Mujhe dukhon se bhay nahi, sansar ke sankochpoorn sanketon ki lajja nahi. Vaibhav ki jitni kadiaan toot ti hain, utna hi manushay bandhano se chhoot ta hai aur tumhari aur agrasar hota hai! Parantu.... Yeh theekraisir par phootne ko tha! Arya – samrajay ka naashinhiaakhon ko dekhna tha! Hariday kaamp utha hai, deshabhimaangarajnelagta hai. Mera swatavna ho mujheadhikaar ki aavashaktanahi. Yeh nitiaursadacharon ka mahanaashrayvriksh-guptsaamrajay-harabhrarahe, aur koi bhiiskaupyuktrakshak ho. Oh! Jane do ,gaya, sabkuchgaya! Mann bhelane ki koi arevastunarahi. Kartavay-vismrit; bhavishay-andharpoorn, lakshayheen daud aur ananat saagar ka santran hai. (Skandgupta. IV. vii. pp.131-132). (I want salvation for Buddha followers and complete respect for ‘ascetics’. Though my conscious tells me that I am a king, but it seems, someone somewhere challenges my authority as if my crown hardly has any meaning. O, God! Why do you shower ‘sufferings’ on a man like me? As far as I am concerned, I am not afraid of ‘shame’ and ‘miseries’. What I believe is that the more one goes through them, the stronger he becomes. But I feel very sorry to see this state of affairs in my kingdom. I wish I would not have seen it at all. My heart trembles and ego pricks. I pray safe hands protect this kingdom. It is topsy-turvy on all counts around).

Prasad’s nationalism, patriotism, and consciousness can also be seen in plays like *Kalyani Parinay* (1911), *Ajatshatru* 1922), *Chandragupta* (1931) and *Dhruvaswami* 1933). In *Chandragupta* too, Cornelia announces that Independent India is our dream. She wants an independent country which should be full of human values, passion, patriotism, and

sacrifices. “Swapnonkadesh, yeh tyagauryankapaalna, yeh prem ki rangbhoomi. Anya deshmanushyon ki janambhoomi hai; yeh Bharatmaanavta ki janambhoomi hai” (Prasad’s *Chandragupta*, 3.2 p. 131).⁵

In Prasad’s era, the country was ruled by the Britishers. They had two options in front of them that either to follow Gandhi ji’s Ahimsa’s path or to follow Tilak ji’s rule which said – don’t ask for your liberties but snatch them. Though Prasad believed in humanism but he followed the path of Tilak. That is why at one place he makes Bhataark say – *Nahi to kya rone se, bheek maangne se kuch adhikaar milta hai? Jiskehaathon main balnahiuskaadhikaarhikaisa? Aur yadibheekmaangkar mil bhijaaye to shantikirakshakaunkarega?* (Skandgupta p.43) (Can we ever get our right by crying and begging for it? The fact is that the one who is weak hardly relish his ‘right’. Even if we get our right, no one will protect it)?

Prasad believed that the liberties and rights are not meant to be begged. According to him, the country needs real heroes who can give away their lives for the country. Through *Skandgupta*, Prasad wanted to spread the feelings and emotions of patriotism and heroism, in the young blood. He reminds us of our glorious ancient past and feels sorry for the sad affairs:

Humarijanam-bhoomithiyahi, kahinse hum aaye the nahi. Jaatiyon ka, uthaan-patan, aandhiyan, jhadiprachandsameer. Khade dekha, jhelanaste, pralaymein pale hue hum veer. Charit the poot, bhujameinshakti, namratarahisadasampann. Hariday ke gaurav mein tha garv, kisi ko dekh na sake vipann. Humaresanchay mein that daan, atithi the sada humare dev. Vachan meinsatya, haridaymeinte j, pratigyameinrehetithitev. Wahihairakth, wahihaidesh, wahisaahashai, vaisagyaan. Wahihaishaanti, wahi hai shakti, whai hum divyaaryasantaan. Jiyein to sadausikeliye, yahiabhimaanrehe, yeh harsh. Nichhavar kar de hum sarwasv, humarapyara Bharatwarsh (Skandgupta V. v.pp.149-150). (It was our ‘motherland’.

We have not come from anywhere else. The storm can bring rise and fall of races easily. We have faced these ups and downs ably and have become stronger now. We have always been humane at 'conduct' and strong in 'body'. We have felt 'proud' at heart for caring helpless. We always believed in sacrifice and regarded guests as 'deities.' It was always truth in our words and splendor in our hearts. We are the same Aryan blood. Nothing has changed regarding strength, vigour, knowledge and peace. We wish that our ego and self-esteem never betray us. We shall sacrifice our lives for the sake of motherland).

Further to quote from the text he makes Dhaatusen speak in the same vein that our country is rich in its cultural and moral values and shall remain forever:

Dhaatusen: Bharat samagravishva ka hai, aursampooranvasundhraiskeprempaashmeinaabadh hai. Anadikaalsegyaan ki, manavtakijyoti yeh vikeerankarrahahai. Vasundhra ka hariday – bharat – kismoorakh ko payara nahi hai? Tum dekhte nahi ki vishva ka sabse ooncha shring iske sirhaane, aur sabse gambhir tatha vishal samudra iske charnaun ke neeche hai? Ek-se-ek sundar drishya prakriti ne apne is ghar mein chitrit kar rakha hai. Bharat ke kalyaan ke liye mera sarvasv arpit hai....(*Skandgupta* IV. iv p.125). ('India' belongs to the entire world and everybody in this world has a right for being loved and respected here. Since time immemorial it has spread 'knowledge' and 'love'. Everybody on this earth longs this heart called 'India.' Can't you see the beautiful surroundings – mountains above and ocean below? Every beauty is here. I am ready to give away my whole...)

He wanted that each and every person should love his country. Every page of his play shows the strong feeling of patriotism.

Bhanduvarma: veero! Tumhari vishva vijayini veer-gatha sunder- sunderion ki veena ke saath mandh-dhawni se nandan

mein goonj uthegi. Aseem saahasi aarya sainik! Tumhare shastra ne barbar huno ko bata diya hai ki ran vidhya kewal nrishansta nahi hai. Jinke aatank se aaj vishva vikhyaath room-saamrajyapadakrant hai, unhe tumhara loha manna hoga aur tumhare peron ke neeche dabe hue kanth se unhe swekaar karna hoga ki bhartiya durjai veer hai! Samajh lo – aaj ke yoodh mein pratayavartannahai. Jise lotna ho, abhi se lot jaaye. (*Skandgupta* III. v. p.111). (Your victory shall be celebrated with full vigour and enthusiasm. You soldiers have at times shown the Huns that we are no less stronger than them. Those who have panicked the nations will have to realize that it can't go on unchecked and that to conquer 'India' is not a cake walk. Anyway, let's prepare for the battle). Further, to quote from the text:

Kamla: kaunkehta hai tum akele ho? Samagrsansaartumharsaathhai. Sahaanubhooti ko jaagritkaro. Yadi bhavishyatsedarte ho ki tumharapatan di sameephai, to tum us anivarayastrotseladjao. Prachand aur vishwaspooran padaghat se vindhay ke samaan koi shael uth kadha hoga jo us vighn-shrot ko lota dega. Ram aur Krishan ke samaan kya tum bhi avatar nahi ho sakte? Samajh lo, jo apne karmo ko ishwar ka karam samjh kar karta hai, wahi ishwar ka avatar hai. Utho, Skand! Aasuri vritiyon ka naash kro, sone waalon ko jagao aur rone waalon ko hasaon. Aryavrat tumhare saath hoga aur us aarya-pataka ke neechesamagravishwa hoga, veer. (*Skandgupta* IV.vii.p.134). (Who says that you are all alone? The entire humanity is with you. If you think that you have less time left at your disposal, then it is better to confront them boldly. Can't you act like a deity at least for the time being? You should not forget that to serve humanity is to serve God. Therefore, awake the sluggishness amongst your people. Victory shall certainly be yours).

In 'Skandgupta' Prasad also emphasizes on 'forgiveness' and 'helpfulness' to create the concealed national consciousness, heroism, patriotism, to understand and respect cultural / moral values. Prasad makes Skandgupta when he is made to sit on the throne by Bhanduvarma the king of Malwa and Govind Gupta, the brother of Kumargupta, he announces:

Skandgupta: Arya! Is gurubhaar uttardaitav ka Satya se palan kar sakoon, aur Arya-rashtra ki raksha main sarvasav arpan kar sakoon, aap log iske liye bhagwan se prarthna kijeeye aur aashirwad deejeye ki Skandgupta apna kartavay se, swadesh – sewa se kabhi vichlit na ho. (*Skandgupta* II. vii. p. 93). (Please pray for me that I carry out my duty to protect this Aryan kingdom with full ability / wisdom and bless me that I do not go astray).

With this concern, Jayshankar Prasad creates a hero in the name of Skandgupta. In Indian ancient history, Skandgupta was the real hero - the real freedom fighter. He fought like a real hero and succeeded. He is one of the heirs who contributed to the society more than his potential. He endeavored hard to serve his nation. He was very helping to other kingdoms too. Prasad talks about the Skandgupta's dedication and loyalty towards the Malava Kingdom which requested for his assistance:

Skandgupta: Doot! Kewal sandhi-niyam hi se hum log badhyanahinain, kintooshranagat-rakshabhi Kshatriya ka dharmhai. Tum vishraamkaro. Senapati parndutt smast sena lekar pushyamitron ki gati rokeinge. Akela Skandgupta Malav ki rakshakarnekeliyesannadh hai. Jao, nirbhay nidra ka sukh lo. Skandgupta kejeete – jeeMalav ka kuchnabigudsakega. (*Skandgupta* I. i.p.41). (We are not bound by 'treaties'. To protect the kingdom should be the only priority for Kshatriyas. Senapati is there to hinder their mission. Skandgupta himself is competent enough to protect the nation).

As for 'sacrifice' Prasad makes Bandhu Varma give away his kingdom to Skandgupta. He knew that Skandgupta could run the nation well. Bandhu Varma knew that Skandgupta undoubtedly will prove to be the best king.

In Prasad era, the Hindu communities and Muslim communities were struggling for their rights. Prasad wanted to create unity amongst them through his works. Almost 16 riots happened in 1925. The most dangerous riot was held in 1926 in Kolkata. It was the same time when Prasad was busy in writing *Chandragupta* and *Skandgupta*. Due to these disturbances, the strong feelings of nationalism and patriotism became weaker day-by-day. Gandhi Ji said that this diversity between Hindu and Muslim would not lead us to achieve our freedom. Prasad through this play suggests that the struggle of Hindu-Muslim is the fight of Buddha-Brahmin. His main concern was to create 'unity in diversity'.

To sum up, in *Skandgupta*, Prasad has put his emphases on nationality, humanity, charity, enduring patience, tolerance, forgiveness and respect towards national culture and political values. The play underlines the spirit that, though this country is being ruled and controlled by others (Britishers), still the morale of the countrymen shall never let down, rather it would become stronger and stronger. *Skandgupta* is in itself a message for the country to live together, spread love and devotion. It does not play which tells us about ancient Indian history only, but, at the same time conveys and had successfully succeeded in creating the then subdued national consciousness. Skandgupta shall remain in our minds in the times to come not merely as a character of literary work but as a real freedom fighter – 'a true hero'.

II

Seth Govind Das (b. 1896)

Mahakoshal Kesari Seth Govind Das, the pride of Madhya Pradesh, was born of an esteemed family on 16th October 1896. He was a prolific writer in Hindi. He wrote many artistic pieces for the society. His works were considered to be the best and was even awarded the 'Padma Bhushan,' offered by Dr. Rajendra Prasad, the first President of Independent India. He was also awarded the

doctorate for his literary contribution from Rani Durgawati University, Jabalpur.

Govind Das' plays incomparably won the hearts of the readers. The mythological plays are *Kartavya and Karma*. His social plays, *Vishwa Prem, Nav Ras, Hinsa Ya Ahinsa, Gareebi Ya Ameer, Mahatva Kise, Santosh Kahan, Pakistan, Bhoodan Yagya (1954)*, comprises of real characters like Rajendra Prasad, Nehru Ji, Jai Prakash Narayan and others. The historical one act plays are *Krishi Yagya, Karma Hi Sachcha Varna Athava Javal, Sahit Ya Rahit*, etc. As for full-length historical plays, we have *Harsha (1935), Kuleenta (1942)* and *Shashi Gupta (1942)*.

Other historical plays by Seth Govind Das are *Vikas; Sinhal Dweep; Vijay Beli; Ashoka; Bhikshu Se Grihasthase Bhikshu; Shershah and Vishwasghat*. His all historical plays reflected in the market worked out, but we are restricted to only one play that is *Ashoka*, written in 1947.

Ashoka - The Ruler

The reign of Ashoka forms the brightest page in the history of India. He reigned from 273 BC - 232 BC. He was born in 304 BC and died in 232 BC, at Pataliputra, now called as Patna. Under his leadership, India occupied the foremost place among all other civilized nations. Ashok was a man of "unbounded energy, and he gave himself without stint to the task of perfecting the administration of his empire and ensuring the happiness of his subjects". To quote, H.C. Rai Chaudhary:

He had the energy of Chandragupta, the versatility of Samudragupta and the catholicity of Akbar... He preached non-violence, when violence in war, religious ritual, royal pastime, and festive gathering were the order of the day. The statesman who turned evil administrators into religious propagandist... did not rest till the sound of the war-drum was completely hushed certainly pursued a policy to which Chandragupta Maurya would have looked askance⁶. and to quote H.G. Wells:

Amidst the tens of thousands of the names of monarchs that crowd the columns of history... The name of Ashoka shines and almost alone as a star. From the Volga to Japan his name is still honoured... China, Tibet... preserve the tradition of his

greatness. More living men cherished his memory today than have ever heard the names of Constantine or Charlemagne."⁷

His father was Bindusara and mother was Janapadakalyani, the daughter of a Brahman of Champa, who was kept out of her rights for some time by the intrigues of the other queens of Bindusara, but succeeded ultimately in winning the king's favour and gave birth to two sons, Ashoka, and Vigatasoka. Ashoka had three wives, Rani Kaurwaki, Rani Padmavati, and Rani Tishyaraksha. Ashoka's predecessor was his father Bindusara, and his successor was Dasaratha Maurya. His empire stretched from present-day Pakistan to Mysore state in the South. His inscriptions clearly reveal the main stages of his domain and motives during his reign. The inscriptions fall into two broad groups, one about the thirteenth and fourteenth years after the king's coronation, and another in the twenty-seventh and twenty-eighth years. The legends of Ashoka are available in two versions:

The southern recension, found in the two Pali chronicles of Ceylon – *Dipavamsa and Aahavamsa*, in its respect form, dates from the fourth and fifth centuries A.D., but rests on the material of much earlier origin. The northern account in the *Avadanas* presents the same features with variations. Some indication of the age of the *Avadanas* we get from the fact that they are illustrated in the sculptures on the gateways of Sanchi. Both versions contain amplifications, under the influence of local conditions, of a more primitive legend that had grown up among the Buddhist communities in the neighbourhood of Pataliputra. Kausambi and Mathura might have been the centres where the peculiarities of the Southern and Northern recensions were developed round about 150-50 B.C.⁸

The extent of his empire is guessed from the distribution of his Rock Edicts. In the West they are found at Girnar on the Kathiawar Peninsula and Sopara on the Bombay coast; in the south in the Raichur district of the Nizam's dominions and the east at Dhauli and Jaugada in the Puri and Ganjam districts. The rock edicts mark the north-eastern boundary line at Shahbazgarhi and Mansehra in the Peshawar and Hazara districts and Kalsi in the Dehra

Dun district, and it is continued by the Nigali Sagar and Rummindei pillars in the Nepalese Tarai and by the Rampurva pillar in the Champaran district.

There are thirty-three inscriptions of Ashoka varying in length and importance and are available in different versions. They are mostly in the language called *Magadhi* (except the ones of Girnar and Shabazgarhi) – the official language of the Royal Chancery at Patliputra. The inscriptions in “Shabazgarhi and Mansehra are in the Kharosthi alphabet written from right to left; at the end of the inscriptions in the Mysore state the word *Lippi Karna* is also found written in Kharosthi; otherwise, all the Ashoka inscriptions except the Laghman fragments are written in one variety or other of the Brahmi script. At Yerragudi, the Minor Rock Edict is found written partly in the boustrophedon style that is alternately from left to right and vice-versa”.⁹

Ashoka is one of the India’s greatest emperors who transformed India into Religious India. He was a Hindu ruler but after some years, he converted himself to a Buddhist. It happened after his conquest of Kalinga (now Orissa) where 1, 50,000 persons were captured, a1, 00,000 were slain, and many times that number perished. After spreading the blood of the innocents, he remorse over his drastic mistake. The feelings which they evoked in him are thus described in his inscription, probably in his words:

Thus arose His Sacred Majesty’s remorse for having conquered the Kalingas, because the conquest of a country, previously unconquered, involves the slaughter, death, and carrying away captive of the people. That is a matter of profound sorrow and regret to His Sacred Majesty.

There is. However, another reason for His Sacred Majesty feeling still more regret, since in such a country dwell Brahmans or ascetics, or men of various denominations, or householders...To such people in such a country befalls violence or slaughter, or separation from their loved ones. Or misfortune befalls the friends, acquaintances, comrades, and relatives of those who are themselves well protected while their affection is undiminished. Thus for them also, that is a mode of violence.¹⁰

Ashoka understood that ‘war’ not only burn and destroy the battlefield but brings an end to other innocent lives as well; it continues to poison the minds and lives of the survivors for a long time. Ashoka swore that he shall never again take to arms and commit such a crime against humanity ever. Many kings have sworn in the history of the world not to fight again but only after they had been defeated. It was the salvation in him which brought him to transform himself into a Buddhist

Buddha’s message of non-violence, kindness, and love of humanity appealed to him, and his heart became the home of compassion, right living and love. He gave up hunting and eating meat. He put an end to the killing of animals for the royal kitchen. He also proclaimed that all his subjects should live a life of righteousness. He realized that the victory of ‘Dharma’ (righteousness) was the noblest. The sword spills blood but from ‘Dharma’ it springs the fountain of love.

The first step Ashoka took to spread ‘Dharma’ (it was almost after two years of Kalinga war) was to undertake a pilgrimage. His pilgrimage started with his visit to the holy place called Sambodhi, where Gautam Buddha breathed the last.

Ashoka also got the laws of ‘Dharma’ social ethics and moral living engraved on rocks and stone pillars both in India and abroad. Ashoka’s ‘Dharma’ was primary:

...ethical social conduct and it includes even the animal kingdom within the scope of its all-embracing benevolence. We read at the end of the Minor Rock-Edict (Yerragudi) ‘Obedience must be rendered to mother and father, likewise to elders; compassion should be shown towards men; the truth must be spoken; these moral virtues (*dhamma-guna*) must be practiced... Pupils should respect their teachers in accordance with the ancient rule (*poranapakiti*). Again in the third Rock Edict: ‘Meritorious (*sadhu*) is obedience to mother and father. Liberality (*danam*) to friends, acquaintances, and relatives, to Brahmanas and Sramanas is meritorious. Abstention from killing animals is meritorious. Moderation in expenditure and moderation

in possessions are meritorious. Emphasis is laid on qualities of mind (*bhava suddhi*) in the Seventh Rock-Edict: 'But even one who practices great liberality but does not possess self-control, purity of mind, gratitude, and firm devotion, is very mean. Proper treatment of serfs (*dasa*) and servants (*bhataka*) is particularly mentioned in the eleventh and thirteenth Rock Edicts. The Second Pillar-Edict contains this striking and comprehensive statement of the emperor on Dharma: 'To practice morality is meritorious; but what does morality include? It includes few sins, many virtuous deeds, compassion, liberality, truthfulness, and purity. The gift of spiritual insight (*cakkhu-dana*) also has been bestowed by me in many ways.'¹¹

Ashoka died about 232 BC, and seven kings followed him in regular succession during a period of about fifty years. No detailed account of these kings is known to us, but the disruption of the empire began almost a decade after the death of Ashoka.

Seth Govind Das's *Ashoka* (1947)

Govind Das in his preface talking about the historical authenticity of the play writes: "*prastutnaatak ki rachna Ashoka ki jeevni par kigayihai. Iska na to koi paatrakalpanikhaiaurnakoighatna. Patron mein Kunal ki patni ko chhorsheshsabhi patron kenaambhiaiitihaasikhain. Kunal ki patnibhipaatra to aitihaasik hi hai par uskanaam Kanchanmala kadachitkalpanik hai*".¹² (The following play is based on the life of Ashoka. In this play except Kunal's wife named Kanchanmala, no event / character and names are imaginary)².

²All the translations in English of this Hindi play that follows in this chapter are mine.

Mrigaya mod-vihar gaman the, narpatiyon ke kotuk khel; Dharmik yatra pratha chlayee, nav sambodhit gaman vrat jhel. Shilalekh aganit mein ankit kiye anekon nij updesh; Jeevan-path ko saral sunskrit karna, tha, paawan udeshya. Rasna tripti, ek hi shan ki, jeewon ka asankhyabalidan; Ghrinit, vigharit, karm-tyag, yeh, manavkakatavaymahaan. (Epilogue to Ashoka) (Hey, Ashoka! you are great / India's

Ashoka is the creation of Govind Das's meticulous study of history, inter alia, *Cambridge History of India* (Part-I), *The History and Culture of Indian People* (Part-II), Dr. Bhandarkar's *Ashoka*, Dr. Radhamukund Mukherjee's *Man and Thought in Ancient India*, Dr. Benimadhav's *Ashoka and his inscriptions*, Gundopant's *Ashoka Aur Uske Lekh* and Dr. Harishchandra's *Ashoka*.

The play covers 28 years (263 BC- 235 BC) of Ashoka's reign. However, the play ends with a long song which praises 'Ashoka' as the brightest king ever the world has seen. The intensity of the influence of Ashoka the emperor, regarding his magnanimity as a successful ruler and a messiah

pride, lover of humanity and a pious king / After having heard the screams of the innocents who died in the war of Kalinga you were utterly transformed / the world thus saw in you an extraordinary being / you swore not to fight again and shall follow the path of righteousness / the world saw in you altogether a new, different person / you understood the meaning of religion, truth, sacrifice and devotion apparently / and thus changed your way of living completely / the only objective you were with was to sacrifice your life for the welfare of humanity / you till today stand as an epitome of magnanimity, patriotism, heroism and righteousness)

Conversion from one religion to another religion is not a minor task to undergo, and this might be the reason that Govind Das chose to write on Ashoka. His bravery and the repentance over his brutality led Govind Das to justify it in his piece of art. Govind Das took this step by writing on Ashoka's life and his genuine transformation into a real king. His transformation from "the cruel Ashoka into the pious Ashoka has been described in the play, *Ashoka*.

This enormous change in his life led him to be pronounced in the whole world. He became famous in every corner of the world. In fact, his name shines the most amongst the kings of the world. Govind Das considers Shri H.G. Wells's comments on Ashoka in the preface in his book *Ashoka*:

who practiced and preached 'Ahimsa' is shown explicitly in this epilogue:

*Hey Ashoka! Manav mahaan!
Bharat gaurav! Manuj pujaari! Shaasak
karunavaan!
Sun karah, ran mein, Kaling ki, kaamp uthe
vijayi ke praan;
Rakth-paat-bhay-bheet manuj ne, tum mein
paya, saccha traan.
Rakth-sanata vijay shree ka, mithiya mana,
kalushit maan;
Puran ahimsa vijit, manuj-mann, satt vijay
ka kaha pramaan.
Hinsa trasat jagat ne paya, tum mein,
paawan paitrik prem;
Dhram, satya, daan, dayamay, aacharon
mein samjha chhame.*

Ashoka: *itihasa ke sainkaron nareshon aur samraton ke naamo ke beech Ashoka ek matra nam tare ki bhanti chamkta jaan padhta hai.*¹³ (The name 'Ashoka' shines the brightest amongst all the kings in history).

His father Bindusara ruled Mauryan kingdom from 298 B.C. -272 B.C. He was a scholar undoubtedly, but he survived with no extra efforts to empower his kingdom. His son Ashoka expanded the whole kingdom with positive developments. This might also be the reason for the bringing of Ashoka in his mind and soul. Govind Das writes:

Ashoka: Chandragupta Mauryanechanakya ki sahayatasejis Maurya ki Bharat mein sthapanakithivehsaamrajaya Chandragupta keputra Bindusaar kesamayvaise hi raha. Bindusaar ka bahutkamvivranihaasmeinmiltahai. Parantu Ashoka ne ek to us mein vridhi ki, doosre iske liye jo Kalinga desh mein yudh hua; us yudh ke paschaat Ashoka ke hariday mein esa parivartan hua ki uske samast aadarsh hi badal gaye aur har prakaar ki jeev-hinsa chod usne saare sansaar ko ahimsa ke dwara prem sootra mein baandhne ka prayatan kiya. Ashoka ne jo kuch kiya us ke sambandh mein usne anek shilalekh likhaye aur in mein se jin shilalekhon ka ab pata lagta hai usse bhi gyat hota hai ki usne kitne mahaan kaarya

kiye the.¹⁴ (The Maurya kingdom established by Chandragupta Maurya with the help of Chanakya remained the same even at the time of his son, Bindusara. Ashoka not only expanded the kingdom geographically but also tried to unite it through 'ahimsa', especially after the war of Kalinga. The inscriptions engraved by Ashoka on rock edicts speak a lot about his righteousness).

In the play when Asandhimitra asks Ashoka the reason for his living in despair, after the Kalinga war which resulted in the death of many innocents and tens of thousands of the soldiers who died in the war. As a result of which he stopped all his military operations and appointed his employees to analyze and investigate the concerns of the nation. Ashoka replies in penitence:

Ashoka: tab kya kiyajaye, devi, yehi to nirnaykarnahai. Is liyeraatrike is praharmeinhimaineagramaataya ko bulaya hai. (kuchrukhar) suno, tumdonosuno! Kalinga ke yudh mein jo kuch hua hai voh mujhe pal maatra ko bhi chain nahi lene deta. Aahat sainkon ke shav mere netron ke saamne ghoomte rehet hain, chhan maatr ko bhi drishti se ojhla nahi hote. Ghayalon ka aatranaadmerekanaanonmeingoonjatareheta hai, eknimish matra ko bhi voh swar band nahi hota! Aur... aur mritkon ki sankhya thodi nahi thi. Kalinga ke sainkon mein hi pahoonchi thi ek laksh ke upar ke sainko mein hi voh pahoonchi thi ek laksh ke upar. Ghayalon ki sankhyaissekaiguniadhikthi. Deidlakshkeupar Kalinga sainikkaidkarke daas banaye gaye the. Na jaane kitne puron aur gramon mein agni lagi thi aur vahan na jaane kitna jansamuday bhasam hua aur jala tha. Phir is mritako ne apne kutumbhiyon visheshkar apni patnio aur mataon ko mritak se adhik mritak bana diya tha. Unka vikalap kaanon ke parde phad deta tha, voh aseehniya, sarva aseehniya tha. Kalinga desh ki in sehsro, laakho behno ke maang ke sindoor, lalaat ki tikli, naak ki nathni, griva ka mangalsootra, haath ki

choodiyaan, hatheli ki mehendi, paer ki mahawar aur paer ki ungalion ki bichiyaa samast suhaag chinhon ko maine mitaya hai. Kitni matayon ko maine putraheen banaya hai...

(III. i.pp. 56-57). (What should I do! We have to take a decision. I have called Agramaataaya at this hour of thenight. Listen, you both listen, I have not been able to sleep after the war of Kalinga. The sights of the deformed dead bodies do not go out of my sight and continue haunting me. The screams of the wounded posion my ears. The number was huge – a lakh was slain and more than the figure, captured. Not only this it is because of me that tens of thousands of women have gone widows. It was fire all around. The aftermath still continues to poison the minds and lives of the survivors. I shall never be able to forgive myself for this deed of mine).

Even before the Kalinga war, Ashoka had an inclination towards non-violence. He was non-decisive about the war. In actual, he did not want to purport a war in Kalinga. He says to his beloved queen:

Ashoka: yeh ki jismarg par main chalahahoon, vehtheekmarg hai yanahi, hinsaserajayavistar, aamod – pramod vihar yaatrayein, ye theek hai yaahimsatmaksaddhmgrahankarna. (II. Sc. i.p.37.) (I am in a fix, what to choose - this way of living or to follow the path of 'righteousness').

And when he receives his son Mahendra and the daughter Sanghamitra in the 'ascetic' clothes, he staggers and stares at them. Asandhimitra laughs at Ashoka and says:

Asandhimitra: kya poochte ho, tumharemannmein to hinsaserajayavistar, aamod-pramod, vihar yaatraienaaditheek hai yaahimsatmaksaddhm graham karna, yehmansiksangarshhichalraha hai, par ye donobhai-behen to kadachit bhikshu-bhikshuni hone hi walehain. (II.i. p.40). (You understand better. Anyway your son

and daughter have already decided to leave these 'worldly affairs').

Ashoka, after the war of Kalinga, extended his Buddhist mission to other countries like Burma Malaya, Sumatra, Ceylon, Mysore Sri-Lanka. He sent Mahendra and Sanghamitra to Ceylon for this purpose. He spread his mission to the Monarchs of different countries like Alexander of Epirus, (Northern Greece), Ptolemy of Egypt, Antigonus of Macedonia, Magas in Cyrenia (North Africa). In fact, this real mission brought the Indian continent unified.

Ashoka, as a great leader, transformed the hobble condition of his kingdom into the peaceful country. After the war of Kalinga, he spread love and peace amongst his people.

Ashoka was a noble man. He was also a concerned father for his kids. He never discriminated between boys and girls. He always adored his two wives, Rani Asandhimitra and Rani Kaurwaki (Karubaki).

These ladies enjoyed amicable relations with each other. Govind Das has reflected their sincere love in the play. In Act-II when Karubaki says that the step wife is always a rival of the first wife of the same 'man,' she replies:

Asandhimitra: par sacchesnehkasawroop to sankeerannahokaryapak hai. Veh to samasthsrishti par phelaayajasaktahai. Aur yadi srishti ki annanth vastuyein sneh ke sansaar mein saajhedaar reh sakti hain to sautein kyon nahi?(II. i.p.35.) (Love is like an ocean. When odd ones can be accumulated why not step relations).

Govind Das has represented almost all the true aspects of Ashoka's life. He has not left out any significant event of his life in the play *Ashoka* except Ashoka's family life and their domestic issues which are more focused than the representation of the war of Kalinga. There is microscopic dismissal on it. It is only in Act-II-Scene-ii which talks about the war of Kalinga:

Ashoka: aurab to sheeghra hi Kalinga par bhiMagadh sena ka aakraman hone wala hai.

Usmeinmaanavsanghaarbhihoga.(II.iii.p.50-

52). (The army of Magadh is at hand and naturally bloodshed will be there again).

In the subsequent Acts, Govind Das has concentrated more on the domestic issues like Ashoka getting married to Tishyaraksha, who was his maid earlier. This wedlock caused several problems in his domestic life. She flatters his son Kunal. But, Kunal convinces himself and gets blind to get away from the evil intention of Rani Tishyaraksha. When Ashoka sees him blind and comes to know of the truth, he awards her the death sentence. And at the same time, he loses his proud and authority of kingship in 'grief'. He renounces himself and announces Kunal's son Dasaratha Maurya as his successor of the Mauryan Empire.

This is how the story proceeds with a little picturization of the war of Kalinga which was the only experience which turned him into a comfortable king of the nation. Govind Das has written an open play related to history, but it has the conscious outlook and, i.e., the path of 'Ahimsa' which Gandhi Ji followed and got India freedom.

In both the plays, the playwrights had the credential works in their hands which got them extolled remarks on the return.

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