# FOREWORD

A NEW EDITION OF an ancient Sanskrit text could seem quixotic to some. Why, for instance, should we be asked to read plays written by the emperor Harsha and performed in the seventh century? What can they possibly mean to us, show us or teach us?

One has only to read them to discover more than one reason, many in fact, to do so. The obvious reward is that they inform us—and surprise us with knowledge—of a courtly, sophisticated, refined and charming society set in an age we might otherwise consider, out of ignorance, "dark," whereas the plays present a setting and a society that could be Versailles.

They provide us with an overflowing cornucopia of images and metaphors that belong to a pastoral world far removed from our present-day urban nightmare, and beguile us with their descriptions of earth, sky, light, forest and flowers with which man was once, we are reminded, closely in touch.

They impress us and make us laugh out loud in recognition of the fact that human nature has not changed over all the intervening centuries and that the desires, ambitions, hopes, jealousies and sympathies we experience now have always been a part of human nature, no matter at what point in history.

And they show us how the boxful of magic tricks that is theatre—impersonation, masquerade, pantomime, carnival, illusion, sleight of hand and repartee—will always captivate an audience wanting to be entertained.

### TWO PLAYS BY HARSHA

Harsha himself, the king of Kanauj, believed so in the magical power of the stage, for he wrote three plays in which he drew upon the myths and legends to be found in ancient texts, embroidering them with details from his own reign and court. But his compositions cannot be termed historical drama because they were not written to celebrate his rule or glorify battles and conquests as such drama traditionally does. While in the first of the two plays we have here, 'The Lady of the Jewel Necklace,' he despatches with an account of a battle with the king of Kósala in three brief pages, there is a longer description, in 'The Lady Who Shows Her Love,' of a battle fought by King Údayana's army with the king of the Vindhyas. In reality King Harsha had failed in his attempt to invade the Deccan but in the play he gives his counterpart, King Údayana, a victory. Yet when Údayana hears how bravely his opponent fought, he spontaneously cries out "Bravo!" (p. 311) and declares that his courage in death "puts us to shame" (p. 313). His minister responds "Your majesty, only someone like you, who side so entirely with virtue alone, would take pleasure in an enemy's virtues" (p. 313). Údayana also expresses a wish to adopt any child who may have been left orphaned. These were surely extraordinary pronouncements then as they would be today, and Harsha's own acts were as unusual as those he ascribed to Údayana: he is said to have given up warfare and conquest and chosen the path of peace. It is conjectured that he was greatly drawn to the Buddha and converted to Buddhism later in life. One of the three plays that he wrote is in fact dedicated to the Buddha while the others are to Shiva.

In playwriting, he followed the tradition of doing so for festive occasions so they might be performed at court for, say, the spring festival. They do not present conflict or tragedy; these might be alluded to or described but they are not depicted. Any action takes place offstage and is only reported. The scenes make for a chosen mood (*rasa*)—in this case of love—which unfolds according to the traditional steps of a Sanskrit play, starting with a benediction and a prologue, then proceeding through four acts, each introduced by a prelude, and concluding with the actors' epilogue. It is the unfolding and development of the mood, the *rasa*, that impels the play, not any dramatic action as such. The production would have relied heavily on dance, music and lyric verse, as in a masque, for which reason plays were known not as drama but as *drśyalkāvya*, a spectacle poem.

Both the works have King Údayana and his consort, Vásava·datta, as the central characters; in each a series of fortuitous events is set in motion whereby the king also acquires the hand of a second beauteous maiden, Ságarika—the Lady of the Ocean—in one, Arányika—the Lady of the Forest—in the other (thereby becoming Lord and Master of Earth and Sea!) while also employing all his wiles to make Queen Vásava·datta acquiesce in these acts. Harsha/Údayana thus displays his preference for appeasement and reconciliation over conflict and warfare, and it is this preference that is the central theme and motivating factor of the two plays. One could say that Harsha/Údayana manages to marry the 'Artha Shastra,' the art of politics, with the 'Kama Sutra,' the art of seduction.

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Harsha/Údayana would have enthusiastically endorsed the slogan "Make love, not war." It is to the former interest that he devotes his attention, thereby turning what might have been parables of statecraft into light-hearted romantic comedies. Threats of conflict are not all over territory: there is also the amusing competition between the king and queen who have "adopted"—or "married"—particular plants in their Garden of Nectar-jasmine in the case of one, mádhavi in the other—and wait to see whose will flower first or most prolifically. By applying a "magic substance" (organic fertilizer, suggests the translator), the king brings his plant to flower first which angers the queen. "My husband, from the fact that your face is flushed" (he has actually just glimpsed the beautiful maiden Ságarika) "I know the new jasmine has flowered" (p. 167)—a veiled accusation that King Údayana is too freely distributing his seed, reminding us that royalty was once associated with fertility and abundance, not only destruction and power. Of course the conquest of beautiful maidens could also represent the acquisition of territory. Queen Vásava-datta brought Avánti (in today's Madhya Pradesh) with her as dowry, Ságarika brings Símhala (Sri Lanka). By marrying her too, Údayana extends his kingdom not by brute force but by artful maneuvering and making of alliances.

He could, in fact, be termed a serial adulterer but, in the first play, he is also depicted as Kama, the god of love, with a bow and arrows made of flowers, and worshipped as such by the women he romances. One might also see him as a secular version of Krishna, who also played a pivotal role in battle and conquest but is depicted always as a god of love, playing his flute to enchant maidens. Harsha combines these different versions by having Údayana appease the queen, presenting Ságarika to her as her "sister." By uniting them he becomes lord and master not only of the two but also of a vast swath of territory.

If one were to set out as a critic, one could say that each of these characters is reduced to two or three characteristics which in the course of the play show no change or development: the king throughout plays the role of the lover, the loved one, the all-powerful; the queen of the jealous consort who nevertheless remains loyal and devout; the two maidens of virginal purity, shyness and helplessness; the jester of greed and foolishness. In this Harsha was following the tradition whereby the playwright, avoiding any individual traits in his characters, endows them with universal qualities instead, and in avoiding development and change, makes them permanent and changeless. His audience would have wanted nothing less.

It is interesting to note that while both love and war are taken as serious business, religion is not. Of course ceremonies and rituals are performed dutifully, festivals are celebrated punctiliously—but they are mostly to do with the seasons, not with religious beliefs. This could be because of Harsha's divided allegiance—to Hinduism, to Buddhism—or, more plausibly, simply because this was an age closer to paganism, even animism, than to religious orthodoxy.

Harsha was also clearly an enthusiastic patron of the arts. We know he was patron of the poet Bana, and of his fascination with the stage, but he also reveals his interest in the

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arts of painting and music. The portrait gallery of Údayana's palace is the setting for the key scene in 'The Lady of the Jewel Necklace,' and the painting of portraits of Údayana and Ságarika plays a crucial role in the drama (it is what informs the queen of their romance rather than any vulgar gossip or rumors). Music is referred to again and again, with considerable erudition in 'The Lady Who Shows Her Love.' Harsha clearly had a connoisseur's eye and ear. By marrying these arts, the plays could so easily be developed into operas. Mozart and Strauss would surely have agreed.

In a discursive piece on her relationship with Sanskrit literature (published on the CSL website), Wendy Doniger relates how, after a long study of Sanskrit, it was on reading Harsha's plays that she came to value the language itself—its riches, its challenges, its possibilities—not only what the language conveyed—plot, character, etc. It clearly delighted her to find solutions for the compound words and multiple meanings which abound in Sanskrit, as in:

a woman who has gone down many an alley: the river who flows on many paths (p. 69)

and.

the silken garment of her breasts: the veil of clouds (p. 335)

and of course the titles themselves: *Ratnāvalī* and *Priyadar-śikā*.

She also relished the frequent puns, e.g. "suite" mistaken by the jester for "sweet" (p. 97), the jokes of the times, e.g., "Brahmins in general and jesters in particular, are said to be fond of food" (p. 482), the double entendres that would have delighted those in the know, and the many instances of sharp repartee, e.g.:

'He really did play that game ... just to make you laugh.'

'That's certainly the truth ... he made me laughed at so much that I could scarcely stand before a good woman like yourself for sheer embarrassment.' (p. 399)

What is also striking is the prominence—and predominance—of similes, metaphors and synonyms drawn from nature—hallmark of a tradition that began in those pastoral times and lasted into the twentieth century (Rabindranath Tagore was still employing it). Harsha belonged to the tradition when it was still fresh and unaffected. Údayana could refer to the sun as "my one-wheeled chariot" (p. 189) and the jester describe the rising moon "red as the cheek of an offended mistress" (p. 201). The Garden of Nectar where "the music of the cries of the cuckoos blended with the humming of the drunken bees" (p. 101) roused Údayana to ecstasy. There are observations that startle with their originality and accuracy, e.g.: "the sunset has passed. Now the day is bent low with age" (p. 113), and "The mass of darkness is black as the hide of forest boars and buffaloes covered with mud" (p. 191).

Some of the imagery will strike the modern reader as rather esoteric, e.g.: "the grace of these courtesans who make a charming hissing sound as they are struck by the water that sophisticated men shoot from horn syringes shaped like the raised hoods of cobras" (p. 93, during Holi, the

spring festival), as also the descriptions of the female physique that bring to mind the sculpture of Khajuraho:

Your face is the moon with its cool rays, your eyes two blue lotuses, your hands like day-lotuses, your two thighs like the inner surface of plantains... (p. 199)

and

My gaze, as if thirsty, passed beyond the pair of thighs with difficulty, and wandered a long time over her broad hips coming to stop in mid-section, a bumpy ride because of the waves of the triple flesh. (p. 151)

Perhaps because the sensibility revealed in such lines is so distant from that of our own times, and because she wishes to bridge that long gap and make it seem not unfamiliar to our ears, Doniger takes some audacious risks in "modernizing" the ancient text. She uses terms known to us such as "sweet-talk" (p. 69) and "crowd-pleaser" (p. 75) and has her King Údayana use distinctly unkingly language like "Damn it" (p. 163). The king's jester—called his "side-kick"—is allowed the most idiomatic speech of all, his frequent exclamation of «hī, hī, bho!» translated as "Wow! Wow!" Some of her solutions to problems of translation are even more startling, e.g.: she gives the term "lounge lizard" to bhujan/ ga (p. 482, "serpents who move on their bellies but also designate a class of voluptuous paramours of prostitutes and parasites of princes") and "Ace Reporter" to the mynah bird medhāvinī (pp. 129, 133, "one who has the faculty of retaining memory"). At one point she even employs Italian: "La commedia e finita" (p. 387), her aim being nothing if not eclectic

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We can imagine Harsha/Údayana and the jester looking over our shoulders at the text, or witnessing a contemporary production of the plays, and laughing at the boldness and insouciance on display.

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