Vasanta

Stories from Sanskrit Plays

Retold by

Arshia Sattar

juggernaut

JUGGERNAUT BOOKS
C-I-128, First Floor, Sangam Vihar, Near Holi Chowk,
New Delhi 110080, India

First published by Juggernaut Books 2024

Copyright © Arshia Sattar 2024

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

P-ISBN: 978-93-5345-413-5
E-ISBN: 978-93-5345-440-1

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, transmitted, or stored in a retrieval system in any form or by any means without the written permission of the publisher.

For sale in the Indian Subcontinent only

Typeset in Arno Pro by R. Ajith Kumar, Noida

Printed at Thomson Press India Ltd

Contents

An Historical Introduction by Upinder Singh vii

Why I Like Sanskrit Plays xxi

Malavika and Agnimitra – *Kalidasa* 1

Nagananda – *Harsha* 19

The Little Clay Cart – *Shudraka* 41

Malati and Madhava – *Bhavabhuti* 75

Yaugandharayana's Vow – *Bhasa* 97

The Holy Man and the Courtesan – *Bodhayana/Mahendravarman* 115

Shakuntala – *Kalidasa* 127

The Minister's Signet Ring – *Vishakhadatta* 149

The Lady with the Garland of Jewels – *Harsha* 179

An Historical Introduction

Ancient India has bequeathed to the world an amazing storehouse of engaging stories, narrated through drama, prose and poetry. This historical introduction offers readers some broad brushstrokes to provide historical contexts for the stories recounted in this book.* Of course the stories can be enjoyed for their own sake. But embedding them in history encourages us to ask questions such as: What do the characters, plots and ideas in these stories tell us about times long past? What was the background of the creators of these stories? Who were their patrons and audiences? To what extent did subordinate and marginalized social groups –lower classes and castes, women, tribal people – participate in literary culture? What was the connection between literature and politics? Were there links between 'high' literature and popular culture? Why were some stories told, retold and enjoyed over the centuries in many different ways, in different languages, in written, oral, visual and performative forms, while others fell by the wayside and were forgotten?

To make sense of what was going on in India in the first millennium, we need to backtrack to the sixth/fifth century BCE, one of the most exciting periods in Indian history. In North India, this was a period of warring states. Monarchies and oligarchies made military and matrimonial alliances and battled each other in their quest for political gain. The emergence and growth of cities ushered in new ways of living and thinking. The origins of the caste system, based on endogamy and hereditary occupation, go back to this period. In Brahminical texts, the Brahmin was placed at the top of the social ladder, the 'untouchable' at the bottom. It is not a coincidence that a time of escalating violence and rapid social change was also a time when thinkers like Mahavira and the Buddha questioned the authority of Brahmins, emphasized the importance of social ethics and preached doctrines of nonviolence and detachment. Jainism and Buddhism asserted the superiority of Kshatriyas over Brahmins, but held that the truly superior person was one who had attained mastery over the senses and freedom from the cycle of birth and death. We should remember that while some people lived in towns and cities, most people lived in the rural countryside, and vast swathes of land across the subcontinent were inhabited by forest tribes who had their own cultural traditions and ways of life.

---

* For further details, see Upinder Singh, *A History of Ancient and Early Medieval India*, 2nd edition (New Delhi, Pearson, 2024).

The rise of the kingdom of Magadha began in the 6th century BCE under the Haryanka and Shaishunaga dynasties, continued under the Nandas and reached a high point under the Mauryas (c. 324/321–187 BCE). The first two Maurya kings – Chandragupta and Bindusara – fought the wars that led to the creation of an empire that eventually extended (in in an uneven way) over almost the entire subcontinent (except the far south), and into Afghanistan in the northwest. Pataliputra was its capital. The third Maurya king, Ashoka, is famous for renouncing war and devoting himself to a vigorous propagation of *dhamma* (the Prakrit form of *dharma*). This was a code of ethics he designed; it was rooted in, but not identical to, Buddhism. Ashoka's dhamma can be understood as goodness, measured in terms of inner qualities as well as external behaviour, towards people as well as animals. The emperor put in place an elaborate propaganda machinery for the dissemination of dhamma. He ordered its tenets inscribed on rocks and pillars and exhorted his officials to spread the teaching. He himself spent a great deal of time travelling around his empire, trying to convince his subjects to be good. Power seems to have gone to his head and he formed an exaggerated idea of the success of his dhamma campaign. The Maurya dynasty came to an end due to a military coup, when Pushyamitra Shunga, the Brahmin commander-in-chief, killed the last Maurya king, Brihadratha, during a military review, grabbed the reins of power and established the Shunga dynasty. The rule of the Shungas was followed by that of the Mitras and Kanvas.

Empires usually advertise themselves well and hence attract a great deal of popular and scholarly attention and interest. The period c. 200 BCE to 300 CE, sandwiched between the Maurya and Gupta empires, used to be seen as a bleak, dark age. Not anymore. These five centuries were momentous from many points of view. State formation spread to various parts of the subcontinent. The porous northern frontier of the Hindu Kush mountains was breached repeatedly by waves of invaders – Bactrian Greeks, Shakas, Parthians and Kushanas. The Satavahanas emerged as a major political force in the western Deccan and fought with the Shaka Kshatrapas for control over the trade routes and ports of western India. In the far south, the Chola, Chera and Pandya kings ruled in the midst of many chieftains. Old cities expanded and new ones emerged all over the subcontinent. Cities hummed with cultural and intellectual activity. Craftspersons produced larger quantities and more varied goods than before. Routes over land and water criss-crossed the various regions of the subcontinent and connected it with distant lands, from the Mediterranean to Southeast Asia. Kings issued coins made of precious metals as well as base metals and alloys. These often had portraits of rulers and deities and writing on them, and functioned both as a medium of economic exchange and political messaging. Many new cultural winds blew into the subcontinent, especially the northwest, in the wake of invasions and expanding trade. Sophisticated styles of stone sculpture emerged in Gandhara and Mathura and coexisted with the older traditions of terracotta art. The devotional worship of images of deities in shrines became a cornerstone of religious life. The emergence of Mahayana Buddhism, the split in the Jaina sangha (monastic order) between the Digambaras and Shvetambaras and the growing popularity of Vaishnavism, Shaivism and Shaktism are important aspects of the religious history of these centuries.

Vedic hymns and the Sanskrit epics (Mahabharata and Ramayana) contain literary elements, but something that we can recognize as full-fledged literature was born at the cusp of the new millennium. It was born in three languages – Sanskrit, Prakrit and Tamil. Ashvaghosha and Bhasa were the earliest known exponents of Sanskrit *kavya* (literature). The Satavahana king, Hala, is said to have been a poet and a complier of the *Gatha Sattasai*, an anthology of fine Prakrit poetry. Kings and chieftains of South India patronized poets who composed poems of love and war in Tamil, later collected into the anthologies *Ettutokai* and *Pattupattu*. Rulers were not the only patrons or audiences of literature. The urban connoisseurs with a taste for the fine things in life included businessmen, merchants and sophisticated courtesans referred to in Sanskrit texts as *ganika*s. The creation and consumption of literature was very much an urban phenomenon.

Sanskrit rapidly acquired prestige as a premier language for religious, intellectual and literary expression. It also started taking over from Prakrit as the language of political power. Kings started proclaiming their authority through their *prashasti*s in inscriptions: a section of a royal inscription, and sometimes the entire inscription, was devoted to the king's praise. The prashastis gave details of genealogies and political events and generally reported political successes rather than defeats. They advertised the greatness of kings on and off the battlefield, presenting them in a flattering light in increasingly sophisticated literary prose and verse. Kings started issuing land grants with tax benefits to Brahmins and Buddhist monasteries. These were recorded on stone or copper plates and provide valuable information about changes taking place in political, social and economic life. The beneficiaries of these land grants were not necessarily directly aligned with rulers' personal religious beliefs. For instance, the Satavahana rulers, who were Brahmins and performers of Vedic sacrifices, made generous grants to Buddhist monks. The general strategy, which was politically astute, was to build alliances with Brahmins and with different kinds of burgeoning religious institutions.

It was not only kings who were developing the epigraphic habit. Ordinary people had their religious devotion inscribed in hundreds of donative inscriptions across the subcontinent. These include inscriptions at Buddhist sites such as Sanchi and Bharhut in Central India and Nashik, Karle and other cave sites in the Western Ghats. In South India, there are hundreds of inscriptions in the Tamil language and Tamil–Brahmi script, many of them recording donations to the Jain monastic order. Donative inscriptions offer exciting glimpses into social history and tell us about the background of the people who were funding the religious establishments that were mushrooming all over the subcontinent. For instance, inscriptions from the western Deccan mention jewellers, goldsmiths, blacksmiths, ironmongers, perfumers and stone masons as donors.

The period c. 300–600 CE is often referred to as 'the Gupta period', but we should remember that while the Gupta dynasty extended its sway over parts of North and Central India, the Vakataka dynasty was powerful in the western Deccan, and many other less powerful kings and chieftains ruled in other parts of the subcontinent. In South India, the Pallavas came to power towards the end of this period. The Guptas and Vakatakas were connected with each other through a matrimonial alliance. The Gupta princess Prabhavatigupta was married to the Vakataka Rudrasena II and, after the latter's death, she wielded power for many years as queen regent. It was not entirely a man's world.

In the first half of the 20th century, historians writing against the background of the nationalist movement, often described the rule of the Gupta dynasty as ushering a 'golden age' marked by political unification, economic prosperity and achievements in the fields of literature, art and architecture. During the 1960's and 1970s, this was replaced by a more dispassionate view and a better understanding of the complexities of the Gupta empire. Gupta kings are known from their inscriptions, fine gold coins and seals. Their inscriptions include the famous one inscribed on a pillar located in the precincts of the fort at Allahabad, now known as Prayagraj, which proclaims the greatness of Samudragupta (c. 350–370 CE). Interestingly, this pillar also bears Ashokan inscriptions and an inscription of the Mughal emperor Jahangir! Samudragupta's inscription, composed by a high-ranking officer named Harishena, describes the king's military achievements in great detail, in exceptionally fine Sanskrit verse and prose. It also advertises his many virtues and talents, including as a musician, a role in which he is portrayed on some of his gold coins. The Gupta empire declined in the wake of competition from the Vakatakas, the rise of King Yashodharman of Malwa and the invasions of the Hunas from Central Asia.

Even if we abandon the longing for golden ages, there is no doubt that the period c. 300–600 CE saw the production of an exceptionally fine range of literature and the compilation of a great variety kinds of texts. The great Sanskrit litterateurs of the period included Kalidasa, Vishakhadatta, Shudraka, Bharavi and Subandhu. It is interesting that the flowering of Sanskrit kavya took place at a time when Sanskrit had long ceased to be a language spoken by ordinary people. This is reflected in the fact that Sanskrit drama is actually bilingual. With some exceptions, kings and upper-class men speak Sanskrit, while women and lower-class men speak a Prakrit dialect. While the plays represent the perspectives of the socially privileged, they also have elements of social and political critique and satire, often voiced by the *vidushaka*, the hero's Brahmin companion, who tends to speak his mind and provides welcome comic relief.

During the period c. 300–600 CE, the Mahabharata and Ramayana and the major Puranas were given final shape. Several Dharmashastra texts belong to this period; so does the famous treatise on pleasure, the *Kama Sutra*. Works on politics included the *Nitisara* and the *Panchatantra*. Major advances were made in medicine, astronomy and mathematics. All this could not have been possible without the patronage of affluent urban people. The basic plan of the early Hindu temple was laid in the Gupta period, but in terms of spectacular remains, the most striking ones are the Buddhist Ajanta caves. These caves, with their exquisite mural paintings and sculptures, lay in the Vakataka kingdom and were mainly patronized by high-ranking ministers during the reign of King Harishena.

Historians often use the term 'early medieval' for the period between c. 600 and 1200 CE. History is full of lively debates. In the older history books, these centuries used to be described as marked by crisis, decline, decay and decadence. Some historians saw this as the result of the Ghaznavid and Ghurid invasions and the advent of Muslim rulers in North India. These perspectives were challenged by historians who argued that the early medieval period was marked by feudalism in the political and rural spheres due to royal land grants, and a decline in city life, trade and the use of money. And then *this* theory was questioned by historians who argued that during the early medieval period, state formation spread to various new parts of the subcontinent and that various integrative processes were at work; that there were changes in urban centres, trade and coined money, but no overall decline. In fact, there are many continuities with developments in previous centuries. The practice of making royal land grants, which began much earlier, became more widespread and intensive. Kings sought to legitimate their power by making land grants and this led to the emergence of Brahmins as a powerful landed class. Temples too benefitted from the generosity of kings and upwardly mobile social groups such as merchants. The caste system spread to more areas. Several tribal communities came under Brahminical influence and were absorbed into its lower rungs.

This was a time of great vitality in the intellectual, creative and artistic fields. Important changes were in the air. Sheldon Pollock suggests that there were two great moments of transformation in culture and power in pre-modern India.* Around the beginning of the Common Era, Sanskrit, which had a long history as a sacred language in the sphere of religion and ritual, started being used in literary and political expression. Sanskrit texts and the ideas they contained spread far beyond the subcontinent. Then, around the beginning of the second millennium CE, regional languages challenged the position of Sanskrit in the spheres of literature and power, and eventually replaced it. This was connected with the increasingly regional flavour of politics and culture.

A wide range of texts in different languages were written in the early medieval period. The most famous names in Sanskrit literature include Banabhatta, Magha, Bhavabhuti, Dandin and Shriharsha. Although women characters are important in Sanskrit literature, women writers are rare. Works on poetics mention poetesses and cite some of their verses, but the only complete work that seems to have been written by a woman is a play called *Kaumudimahotsava,* attributed to a Chalukya queen named Vijjika. The many Sanskrit texts on literary theory, poetics and aesthetics written during early medieval times include works by Dandin, Vamana, Anandavardhana, Rudrata, Rajashekhara, Mammata, Abhinavagupta and Bhoja. Other types of Sanskrit texts included philosophical commentaries, religious texts, story literature and works on technical subjects such as grammar, lexicography, poetics, dramaturgy, music, architecture, medicine and mathematics. Tamil literature flourished and includes the beautiful songs of the Vaishnava and Shaiva saints known as the Alvars and Nayanmars, and Kamban's *Iramavataram*, a Tamil rendering of Rama's story. We also see the beginnings of Kannada and Telugu literature. Writers and intellectuals wrote on different subjects and could be fluent in several languages. For instance, Dandin's native language was Tamil, but he wrote the *Dashakumaracharita* ('Tale of Ten Princes') and *Kavyadarsha*, a book on poetics, in Sanskrit. The latter circulated widely and was translated into many languages including Tamil, Kannada, Sinhala and Tibetan. So ideas and creativity flowed freely thanks to multi-lingualism and translation.

---

* Sheldon Pollock, *The Language of the Gods in the World of Men: Sanskrit, Culture and Power in Premodern India* (Delhi: Permanent Black [2006] 2007).

The many kings of the early medieval period included Harshavardhana of the Pushyabhuti dynasty, who ruled in the 7th century. He is largely known from the *Harshacharita*, a prose biography written by his court poet, Banabhatta, and the account of the Chinese traveller-monk, Xuanzang. The Pushyabhutis initially had their base in the area around Sthanishvara (modern Thanesar in Ambala district, Punjab). They forged a marriage alliance with the Maukharis of Kanyakubja (Kannauj). After the death of the Maukhari ruler, Grahavarman, Kannauj passed into the hands of the Pushyabhutis. Xuanzang gives a vivid description of the beauty, grandeur and prosperity of Kannauj. Harsha was a patron of learning and the arts. Bana, Mayura and Matanga Divakara were among the accomplished writers who adorned his court. The king himself was a scholar and writer and is supposed to have written three dramas – the *Ratnavali*, *Priyadarshika* and *Nagananda*. It is possible that he composed the text of the Banskhera and Madhuban inscriptions. The former has the king's signature!

One of the important features of the early medieval period was the rise of various Rajput lineages and a struggle for power between the Gurjara-Pratiharas, Palas and Rashtrakutas. The political history of South India was dominated by the Pallavas, Pandyas, Cheras and Cholas. Inscriptions refer to early kings of the Pallava line who ruled in the early 4th century, but the great Pallava political expansion really took off towards the end of the 6th century under Simhavishnu, who conquered the land up to the Kaveri. The Pallavas ruled over Tondaimandalam, the land between the north Pennar and Vellar rivers, with their capital at Kanchipuram. They were embroiled in conflicts with the Western Chalukyas, Rashtrakutas, Pandyas and rulers of Sri Lanka. In the late 9th century, control over Tondaimandalam passed into the hands of the Cholas. The Chola empire reached its heights during the time of Rajaraja I. The reign of Rajaraja's son, Rajendra, saw a Chola naval expedition against the kingdom of Srivijaya (located on the island of Sumatra). Usually, men occupied the throne. But women of the royal household wielded power and authority, and there are some instances of queens ruling in their own right. Three instances come from Kashmir – Didda, Yashovati and Sugandha. While history books are full of details of battles between kings of various dynasties, hundreds of hero stones found all over the country celebrate unnamed heroes and bear silent testimony to the pervasiveness of different kinds of conflict and violence at the local level.

Agrarian expansion continued in various parts of the subcontinent. Social and economic distinctions within rural societies became more marked. Some of this was connected with the phenomenon of royal land grants, already mentioned above. Urban crafts, cities and trade and trade guilds flourished.

Inscriptions mention several commodities involved in trade transactions, for instance rice, pulses, sesame, salt, pepper, oil, cloth, betel leaf, areca nut and metals. The market towns and ports of South India participated in a flourishing subcontinental trade as well as long-distance maritime trade. Powerful merchant guilds such as the Ayyavole and Manigramam played an important role in long distance trade in staples as well as luxury goods. Trade links between the Indian subcontinent, Central Asia, China and Southeast Asia expanded significantly. Many ships docked at the ports on the eastern coast. Mamallapuram developed under the Pallavas, while Nagapattinam rose to prominence under the Cholas.

The Pallava kings, especially Mahendravarman I, Narasimhavarman I and Narasimhavarman II Rajasimha, were great patrons of the arts. Mahendravarman was also a writer. He is said to be the author of the *Mattavilasa-prahasana*, a rollicking satire, which makes fun of all sorts of religious people. Under the Pallavas, Tamil started being used in royal inscriptions. Initially, there was a division of labour between Sanskrit and Tamil, with Sanskrit used for the royal eulogy portion and Tamil for the details of the grant. This trend continued for quite some time.

The history of stone architecture in South India begins in the 7th century and can be connected with the increasing popularity of the bhakti sects. The remains of Pallava period architecture and sculpture are mostly found at Mahabalipuram (Mamallapuram) and Kanchipuram. There are cave temples, monolithic temples and structural temples. The most magnificent accomplishment of the artists and sculptors of the Pallava kingdom is the gigantic open-air relief at Mahabalipuram, interpreted either as representing the story of Arjuna's penance before receiving the Pashupata weapon from Shiva; or Bhagiratha's penance which led to the Ganga River descending to earth but only after the powerful impact of its flow was broken by Shiva's locks. Perhaps the artists deliberately sought to convey ambiguity and mystery. The great architectural remains of the Chola period are found further south. The Brihadishvara temple marks the culmination of Chola architecture and is an example of a temple with important political significance. The Chola period is also known for the technical and aesthetic finesse of the bronzes produced by its artisans, especially those depicting Shiva as Nataraja (Lord of Dance).

Many of the most magnificent Indian temples were built in the early medieval period. Temples were of course sacred spaces, but they were more. Some became important parts of the urban landscape, others became symbols of political power. They attracted patronage from a wide variety of social groups, ranging from kings to merchants. There was an efflorescence and refinement in temple architecture and sculpture, and distinct regional styles emerged. The Arab invasion of Sind in the 8th century and the active role of the Arabs in Indian Ocean trade led to the advent of Islam in the subcontinent. From the 11th century onwards, during the rule of the Delhi Sultans, Islam and the Persian language played an increasingly important role in Indian history. Remains of the earliest mosques in the subcontinent go back to the 8th century and are found in Sindh, Kutch and Gwalior. Christian, Jewish and Zoroastrian settlers made their homes in India, especially along the western coast. Islam, Christianity, Judaism and Zoroastrianism originated in other parts of Asia, but during the early medieval period, they became part of Indian history.

Across the centuries, the Indian subcontinent was both an area of cultural influence as well as confluence. People, texts and ideas travelled. Many ancient Indian texts such as the Mahabharata, the Ramayana, the *Arthasastra,* the *Manu Smriti* and the *Nitisara* travelled extensively and were known in Southeast Asia. Literature and stories travelled. The works of Kalidasa, Bharavi, Bana and Mayura were known in Southeast Asia. The Jataka stories travelled along with Buddhism to various parts of Asia and were narrated through words and images in texts and sculptures. The *Panchatantra,* with its hard-headed lessons on politics and sensible living told through animal stories, travelled even more widely. The earliest translations were into Pahlavi and Arabic, but many more followed, the characters sometimes being replaced by those more familiar to the translators. In India, *Panchatantra* stories were incorporated into later anthologies. They also seem to have influenced the Arabian Nights, the fables of La Fontaine and Sufi mystic literature. There are many beautifully illustrated Persian and Arabic manuscripts of the *Panchatantra*. Throughout history, stories have been told in many different ways, through spoken and written words, images and performances. Whatever may be the form, the world loves a good story!

Literature is not just a backdrop to history; it is an important *part* of history. The voices of ancient poets and writers that have survived across the centuries are precious expressions of imaginative creativity, evocations of a time long gone. Some of the stories, and they *ways* in which they are told, continue to enchant and enthral, even after centuries, even if we read them in translation, even if we may read different meanings into them today.

Upinder Singh
Professor of History
Ashoka University

Why I Like Sanskrit Plays

The plays in this selection of retellings are chosen from the works of the major Sanskrit dramatists, from Bhasa to Shudraka. They cover nearly a millennium – from the second century CE to the ninth century CE – and were written mostly in the northern regions of the Indian subcontinent. Unlike dramatic works in other classical languages (such as Tamil), much of Sanskrit drama from this period and this region has survived, giving us a veritable feast of styles and genres, a multitude of reasons to laugh and cry as we engage with the human situations and emotions that play out before our eyes.

Like the classical period in Greece, drama was a major part of Sanskrit culture. But unlike in Greece, we know little about when and how Sanskrit plays were performed. From other Sanskrit sources, we surmise that plays were performed on significant occasions such as royal coronations and at the great sacrifices that kings conducted. Since all Sanskrit plays open with an invocation to the gods (usually Shiva), we can assume that the plays also had a specifically ritual aspect and were probably performed in temple precincts or other sacred spaces. Every play is first offered to the gods by the *sutradhar*, a combination of what we could call the director and the stage manager, who asks for their blessings to ensure a flawless performance. After that, he turns to the audience, inviting them into the play, as it were, and begs their indulgence for any errors that might occur.

We know these performance conventions from the *Natya Shastra*, a text attributed to the sage Bharata and probably compiled at the turn of the first millennium. In six thousand verses, it lays out, among other things, detailed rules for writing plays and for performing them, for the training of actors and for the dimensions and requirements for the stage. Performance areas were bare, with actors indicating through movement and gesture the different locations and spaces in which the action occurred. Singing and dancing were a part of dramatic performance and so, actors needed to have many skills. But because the *Natya Shastra* is a prescriptive manual, it tells us how a performance should be and not how it was – for this reason, we have very little concrete information about how plays were actually performed.

While we do not know much about audiences and where and how the plays were performed in their own time, their stories and emotions do not feel unfamiliar. We may think of Sanskrit language and culture as far away, in a past that we cannot recapture, but many of the dramatic conventions established in Sanskrit plays continue in our folk theatres today, even in the mainstream films that we watch – the noble hero, the innocent heroine, the bumbling but lovable fool, the happy ending where all the loose ends are tied up in a neat knot. Their stories, too, make us feel as if we have heard or read them before.

Despite these resonances, the world of Sanskrit plays can nonetheless seem alienating to us. For example, it does not on the whole, produce unique characters remembered for a tragic flaw or a great speech. In fact, as modern readers, we might initially feel a sense of frustration with the lack of psychological depth to the characters. Where are the internal monologues, the soliloquies? How do we access their minds and their motivations? Even in their courtships and flirtations they seem to be playing at love, enacting its moods according to a complex set of conventions and rules, rather than succumbing to the throes of passion and desire.

We can also get lost in the profusion of characters, all of them with long and complicated names, who are not distinguished by feature or function. Characters such as the heroine's girlfriends or the young women in the queen's retinue, for example, are the same across plays and situations. They are necessary as they deliver letters and messages and move the plot along in various ways, often by divulging critical information or overhearing secret conversations which they promptly share with their friends and, often, with their mistresses. But Priyamvada could be replaced by Chaturika and we might not even notice.

Why, then, should we read these plays at all? One way to experience the pleasures that Sanskrit plays afford might be to consider what they ask of their audiences, in this case, their reader. Sanskrit drama lays great emphasis on the *sahridaya,* the worthy spectator, who is able to receive fully all the intentions and the emotions with which the writer has imbued the play. This sahridaya, a person of 'like-heartedness', must be well-educated and well-informed, an aesthete, one who understands not only Sanskrit and the other verbal languages of the play, but also the languages of movement and gesture.

I would suggest that the like-hearted person has other virtues they might bring with them to their spectatorship: one of them would be prior knowledge of the stories that the plays draw from. This kind of sahridaya is able to feel more intensely for the characters in the plays because they have already been sympathetic to them in previous versions of the story. The playwright counts on the fact that the sahridaya already knows the stories – whether it be Bhasa or Bhavabhuti, whose plays are so firmly rooted in the Ramayana and the Mahabharata, or Harsha who assumes a knowledge of Udayana's adventures and the conquest of his many wives. Some readers of this book may be familiar with a few of the stories and that would certainly give them the added pleasure of experiencing them retold.

Our hearts go out to Shakuntala, the gentle child of the forest, when she comes to reclaim the promise of marriage from the king who had seduced her. If we have known her before from the Mahabharata, we have previously suffered with her through this public humiliation and when we encounter her in Kalidasa's *Abhijnanashakuntalam* ('Shakuntala'), our sympathy for her is intensified. Vishakhadatta calls upon the well-known legend of Chanakya and his strategic manipulations that stabilized the early days of Chandragupta Maurya's reign. As a result, we admire Chanakya anew in *Mudrarakshasa* ('The Minister's Signet Ring'). Even Shudraka, who invents a plot for *Mricchakatika* ('The Little Clay Cart'), litters his play with references to incidents and characters from the epics. Samsthanaka is established as an illiterate buffoon precisely because he constantly misquotes the epics and confuses their main characters with each other. Someone who knows the epics can appreciate the extent of Samsthanaka's boorishness and be amused by it.

The pleasure we take in these plays lies in the fact they tell us the old stories in new and different ways, deepening our acquaintance with literary characters and bringing us closer to them as we re-live their trials and triumphs and share their emotions. However, even if we are reading the stories for the first time, I believe they have enough charm and whimsy to hold our attention.

In choosing the plays for this book, I have mostly avoided those that retell or invent episodes for the Ramayana and the Mahabharata, even though they are some of the best among those that constitute 'classical' Sanskrit drama. We are familiar with what happens to Rama and Sita and to the main characters in the Mahabharata – Sanskrit epic plays simply expand these narrative arcs, often with great insight and sensitivity. I made the decision to put those plays aside because I wanted to focus on the stories that Sanskrit playwrights chose from other sources, to indicate the variety and breadth of landscapes and moods that they chose to explore in their dramatic works.

For example, *Malavikagnimitram* ('Malavika and Agnimitra'), which is widely held to be Kalidasa's first play, has a historical source, based on the establishment and the expansion of the Sunga empire that flourished in northern India for about a century around 180 CE. So also, Bhasa's *Pratijna Yaugandharayana* ('Yaugandharayana's Vow') revolves around the exploits of a possibly historical ruler, King Udayana, who might have been a contemporary of Gautama Buddha. We have already remarked on how 'The Minister's Signet Ring' too, finds its inspiration in the legend of Chanakya's dedicated service to his young king, Chandragupta Maurya. Whether or not Chanakya was a historical figure, Chandragupta certainly was.

Stories from the secular narrative traditions also find their way into the canon of Sanskrit drama. Harsha's *Ratnavali* ('The Lady with the Garland of Jewels') takes its its story from the *Kathasaritsagara*, Somadeva's compilation of tales that had criss-crossed the sub-continent like rivers, carrying adventure, intrigue and magic. Other Sanskrit playwrights (such as Bhasa), also used these stories. Of course, they were writing centuries before Somadeva put his text together. Their source was probably an older, lost text – the *Brihatkatha,* which predates the *Sagara* by at least five or six hundred years.

As we seek the sources of the stories that these plays (re)tell, we find ourselves in a wonderfully Borgesian predicament: we are looking for a story from a lost (or perhaps, actually non-existent but presumed) source, the *Brihatkatha,* to fully understand and fill out a story that we have (the one in the play). In order to find that earlier story so we understand the one we have better, we refer to a version that is a later telling, from the *Kathasaritsagara,* than the one we are trying to authenticate.

What a conundrum – because no story in the subcontinent is ever lost or completely forgotten, the labyrinthine intertextuality of our storytelling never fails to boggle the mind. But it also shows us, time and again, that the story teller is a hard working person, well-read and well-informed of all that has been told before and even, with mysterious foresight, what will be told after.

The phenomenon of intertextuality shows itself when texts across time as well as contemporaneously know each other and refer to each other, when they seem to be in conversation with each other. Story texts don't 'talk' only to other story texts. The period between the second and fourth centuries CE was a time when many ideas and doctrines were compiled, redacted and 'stabilized', . The Dharma Shastras came together and coalesced around an increasingly dominant version, the *Manu Smriti*. So, too, single texts with putative individual authors, such as Kautilya's *Arthashastra* and Vatsyayana's *Kama Sutra,* developed, reflecting the concerns of a social and political structure that was both urban and imperial.

'The Minister's Signet Ring' and the plays in which Yaugandharayana appears are all about wise (and wily) ministers who keep their kings secure on the throne. But they also give us a sense of what was actually happening in the world they wrote about. Palace intrigues and conspiracies against kings were common, there were frequent skirmishes at the borders of kingdoms as local rulers and oligarchs nibbled at the edges of larger imperial formations, political alliances were made as often through marriages as they were through diplomacy or force. Royal courts were complicated eco-systems with what seems like hundreds of retainers and courtiers and officials and ministers who had informants and spy rings, and all of whom were connected and dependent on each other.

The *Arthashastra* was likely to have informed the writing of these plays and determined the ways in which the characters of the ministers were drawn in terms of their temperaments and actions. 'The Little Clay Cart's' Vasantasena is most certainly the perfect courtesan as imagined in the *Kama Sutra* and her impecunious lover, Charudatta, displays the refined tastes and pleasures of the text's sophisticated, wealthy man-about-town, worthy partner to the courtesan who is trained in all the sixty-four arts.

The hierarchies of the Dharma Shastras are implicit in the texts and plots of Sanskrit plays and reflect the fact that caste was an operative factor in real-life social interactions. Moreover, the aesthetic rules that govern the writing of plays reinforce these hierarchies and divisions: the hero of a *nataka,* for example, must be high born and the woman he falls in love with must be equal to him in status. Hence, the forest girl must actually be the daughter of a kshatriya and the palace maid who catches the king's eye is a princess in disguise for her own safety.

The Dharma Shastras also make a more emphatic appearance in some scenes where caste is overtly referred to. In 'The Little Clay Cart', the captain of the king's guard and a soldier get into a squabble about whether or not a carriage has been appropriately inspected. The captain, who has covered up the identity of the passenger in the carriage, needs to make sure that the soldier will not make his own inspection and so, he picks a fight with him, accusing him of being from a family of low caste barbers. The soldier responds by reminding his superior in rank that he, too, has low caste origins, as he is a tanner who deals with the skins of dead animals. While no caste names are mentioned, the social status of both men is clear in the insults that they throw at one another. Later in the play, when Charudatta is being led to his execution, his great shame lies in the fact that the false accusations against him have sullied his personal and his caste (brahmin) reputation. In 'The Minister's Signet Ring', the deposed minister of the previous regime frets that the new king, Chandragupta, is low caste.

I enjoy these plays because I know the stories they tell and the texts they reference. However, I don't only like them because I know them twice over. I also like them because they show us a vibrant and diverse cultural past, they tell us about cities like the ones we live in, they suggest that the men who ruled supported the arts and promoted a culture of tolerance and co-existence.

Harshavardhana, the author of 'The Lady with the Garland of Jewels' and 'Nagananda', ruled from Kannauj, located in the great river plain of Ganga in the early seventh century CE. We know from other contemporaneous sources that Harsha was a Shaivite, but the Chinese pilgrim and scholar, Xuanzang, who visited Kannauj during his reign, describes him as a devout Buddhist. Harsha was a contemporary of the mighty Pallava monarch, Mahendravarman whose kingdom covered the central part of the southern plateau in the sub-continent. Mahendravarman, who was probably a Jain before he became a Shaivite, was a scholar, a painter, a musician and an architect. He also wrote at least one play, a satire called *Mattavilasa*. During his reign, another Sanskrit comedy, *Bhagavadajjukiya* ('The Holy Man and the Courtesan') was written by Bodhayana, but the play is often credited to Mahendravarman himself.

Whatever the personal beliefs of these kings might have been, the plays they wrote (or the plays that are attributed to them in panegyrics by their loyal court poets) certainly have a distance from orthodox Hindu beliefs and practice. The records we have of their reigns also indicate a healthy eclecticism towards the diverse religious and sectarian ideas that clearly prevailed in the first millennium.

How casually it is mentioned that kings were playwrights! Or, if you prefer it the other way, that playwrights were kings. In addition to Harsha and Mahendravarman, Shudraka might also have been a king. The prologue to his 'The Little Clay Cart' tells us that the playwright was a wise ruler who had performed the *ashwamedha* sacrifice to establish his regional supremacy and that he was known as 'Shudraka'. Some scholars suggest that Shudraka was an Abhira ruler from the third century CE, while some others place him earlier, as a Satavahana monarch of the second century CE. Perhaps coincidentally, all three of these playwright-kings have left us with *a-pauranika* plays, that is, plays whose stories are not drawn from Hindu epics or mythologies. The plots of their plays are putatively historical or original or are taken from secular texts like *Brihatkatha*.

Despite the evidence of these diverse and fluid beliefs and practices, we tend to think of classical Sanskrit as a handmaiden primarily to Hindu religion and culture. But as Sheldon Pollock has persuasively shown us, over the centuries, Sanskrit had become a vehicle to express political and cultural power and was used by all kinds of people. Whatever other languages they might have used (such as Pali and various Prakrits), Buddhists, Jains and other less mainstream religious and philosophical groups (such as the Materialists) also used Sanskrit as a dynamic receptacle of their political beliefs and religious ideas. Just as an example, the first extant Sanskrit play we have was written by Ashvaghosha, a Buddhist. In the *Buddhacharita,* Ashvaghosha writes a grand narrative of Gautama Buddha's life and expounds the central ideas of the Buddhist creed. Clearly, in the classical period and after, Sanskrit writing went beyond the universe of Hindu ideas and practices, in drama as well as other kinds of literature.

This kind of historical information and context only corroborates what we experience when we read the plays, for they themselves point to the pluralistic cultures that birthed them. They speak of distant wars, of shipwrecks and travellers, they imagine a vast world of known and unknown places that lie well beyond the locale of the play and that contribute to its plot. Almost all Sanskrit plays were written in and around royal courts and were intended for social elites, so we find that the action of the plays, too, takes place in these familiar surrounds. Since the royal courts were located in cities, the pulsating energies that drive the plays are actually the cities themselves. Cities thrived because of the presence of the merchants and traders who helped build and sustain them. We know that by the cusp of the first millennium, trade was dominated by Buddhists and Jains. It should be no surprise, then, that Buddhists and Jains might also have made contributions to the universe of classical Sanskrit drama: as playwrights, patrons and audiences.

Cities were spaces of religious and cultural diversity even when their kings and ruling elites were demonstrably Hindu, Buddhist or Jain. Their easy pluralism is manifest, for example, in the frequent appearances of characters such as Buddhist nuns who are treated with great respect as women of virtue and wisdom. Buddhist ideas are often appreciated – brahmins, in the form of the *vidushaka* , are figures of fun; renunciants and ascetics are both admired and mocked; Tantrics and other marginal Hindu sects, such as the Kapalakas, lurk on the fringes of many stories and, in 'Malati and Madhava', become crucial to the plot. In *Ratnavali,* the Simhala princess in disguise is curious about how the people celebrate the Spring festival as it is sure to be different from the way it is celebrated in her country.

Possibly, the most compelling portrait of an ancient cosmopolis where people from different castes, occupations and religions mingled freely is in 'The Little Clay Cart'. Set in Ujjain, the play fully exploits this diversity of peoples and professions for its action – its heroic characters are a masseur, a thief and a shepherd who leads a people's revolution against a corrupt king. A courtesan – and not a chaste virgin – is the play's central female character. She remains an object of sexual desire but is also much admired and praised for her kindness and generosity.

So, I love these plays because I am thrilled when characters go against the grain of prevalent norms and traditions, when people can break boundaries and criticize each other without hatred or malice; I am charmed by how we never lose a story, about how it reappears in a different form, how people are brought together, not by which god they believe in, but by the stories that they know and share; I am fascinated by how social realities leak into the plays, how the plays are influenced by ideas and behaviours around themselves, how they speak to and from the historical moment in which they were written.

But there is also much in the plays that makes me uncomfortable. Those are the very things that I must be clear-eyed about, for the plays are also ways of knowing the past and understanding the present. The multivalence of a polyglot universe excites me. I feel uplifted by the idea that people can speak many languages, but there is no joy in knowing that access to languages and the universes of meaning they contain was restricted by caste and gender. I think about how women are depicted, how the most basic agency over one's self and one's choices seems to be restricted to courtesans and nuns, women who have opted out of patriarchal structures.

There are also instances of caste stereotyping: the hero/king always has a brahmin companion, the vidushaka, who is usually comedic – a parody without malice of a brahmin who is everything the (usually kshatriya) hero is not. The brahmin is always hungry, greedy for food and money, cowardly, lazy and overweight. Plays as different in tone and intent as 'Shakuntala' and 'Nagananda' include this brahmin companion to the hero, but to my mind, the best examples of the vidushaka in this selection of plays are Maitreya in 'The Little Clay Cart' and Vasantaka in 'Malavika and Agnimitra' – lazy and avaricious, yes, but also loyal, quick thinking and very funny, using their wit to alert us to the vanities and foibles of their friends. In short, perfect dramatic foils to the protagonists. However, in Nagananda, when Atreya, the brahmin, is being teased by a drunk retainer and his lady friend, he is not amused when they suggest that he drink from the cup that the woman has already drunk from so that he can savour the sweetness of her lips as well as the wine, or when they mock him for having lost his sacred thread, a marker of his caste. Atreya announces that he is not amused and immediately goes off to purify himself of their touch and proximity.

Social hierarchy and caste are also visible in Sanskrit plays when women and minor characters, especially those who serve, speak in various Prakrits. Access to Sanskrit was already a feature of caste and gender in the first millennium, and it would be worthwhile for us to acknowledge all the aspects of social reality that are being referenced in Sanskrit plays by these linguistic shifts. These alternating registers and languages do not disturb the dramatic movement of the play: one assumes that the high caste characters, almost always men, can understand Prakrit, even if they do not deign to speak it. But we are left in an odd limbo of suspended disbelief – do the women understand what their lovers or masters or other men are saying to them?

In the plays in this volume, there are two kinds of women who can and do, sometimes, speak Sanskrit: the courtesan Vasantasena in 'The Little Clay Cart' and the Buddhist nun Kamandaki, in 'Malati and Madhava'. One way to think about women who can and do speak Sanskrit is this – nuns and courtesans are both 'outsiders', free from gendered norms and conventions because of their relationship with their bodies. The courtesan celebrates her body while the nun denies it. Whether these bodies are defined by indulgence (as with the courtesan) or by austerity (for the nun), they are fundamentally subversive in a universe where the female body's primary importance comes from various conjugal obligations, including procreation. The courtesan and the nun effectively function as casteless because their bodies are beyond the reach of patriarchal control, which also gives them more and greater freedoms and privileges even though they are women.

Speculations and questions like these point to the larger issue of how we might read literature from the past in general. Like all literatures from all cultures and all times, our literary works too, read and write the world of their creation for us. For that reason, they are necessary complements to historical information, telling us what monuments, geographies and inscriptions will not. How then, do we receive and evaluate what world literatures show us? In this case, we cannot deny what the plays are telling us about caste and gender, and we cannot fail to notice that they are exclusively about the adventures and amusements of social elites. It is only 'The Little Clay Cart' that acknowledges the existence of an urban proletariat and allows their aspirations to enter the play, indeed, to bring the play to its climax. That could well account for its continued popularity and multiple adaptations in contemporary Indian theatre.

Literatures animate the human silences that often surround material history. In doing so, they can provide parallel or alternative narratives about the past. Rather than see these alternatives as false or malicious because they make us uncomfortable, we need to include them in our world views so as to expand our ideas about who we are now and how we came to be this way. To have a single narrative of the past that we hold to be the truth is as misleading as it is, ultimately, dangerous. Both beauty and cruelty are a part of human experience, it would behoove us to acknowledge and understand both. The plays in this volume, I believe, can contribute to that more complete understanding.

MALAVIKA AND AGNIMITRA

BY KALIDASA

The plot of *Malavikagnimitram*, a story about a king's infatuation with a young woman who is part of his wife's palace retinue, probably has a historical source. Kalidasa foregrounds the love story, which is filled with overheard conversations, plots and intrigues, lies, betrayals and mistaken identities. The prime mover behind these is the king's friend, Gautama, the *vidushaka*, beloved by audiences and playwrights alike. This comic character is lazy, a glutton for food and luxury, and cowardly but with a cheerful, scheming intelligence that he uses to further his patron's ends. This comedy of errors plays out against the backdrop of a distant war for territory, where Agnimitra's generals and ministers are using force as well as diplomacy to subdue a neighbouring kingdom. It's likely that Kalidasa's historical source for this – the expansion of the Sunga Empire at the turn of the millennium under its second monarch, Agnimitra. Having chosen this real event as the context for his love story, Kalidasa exploits its potential to enhance the plot of his play, using a faraway political disturbance as the reason for a young woman to enter the palace of an ally incognito. Unlike 'Shakuntala', this play is led by the temperaments and desires of its female characters.

List of Important Characters

Agnimitra – king of Vidisha
Bakula – young woman in Queen Dharini's retinue
Dharini – Agnimitra's Chief Queen
Gautama – Agnimitra's companion and close friend
Ganadasa and Haradatta – dance teachers
Iravati – Agnimitra's Junior Queen
Kaumudika – young woman in Queen Dharini's retinue
Kaushiki – Buddhist nun and Queen Dharini's confidante
Malavika – new addition to Queen Dharini's retinue

Two young maids who looked after Queen Dharini bumped into each other as they went about their tasks for the day. Bakula was on her way to see the dance teacher employed by the royal court to check on the progress of his student Malavika, another young woman in the queen's retinue. Kaumudika was carrying a beautiful new ring in the shape of a snake that the queen's jeweller had just made. The maids admired the ring together as its gem stones caught the light. 'Has the king seen Malavika, even though she has been kept away from his sight?' asked Kaumudika. 'Oh yes,' giggled Bakula. 'He saw a picture of her in the gallery. He was passing by and saw the queen looking at a new painting of herself and all her attendants. The king stopped to talk to her and he noticed a lovely young woman in the painting. He asked repeatedly who she was, but the queen ignored his questions. But then, the little princess told her father that the girl in the painting was Malavika!' 'Such innocence!' laughed Kaumudika. 'You can be sure that Malavika was immediately sent into the depths of the palace, to rooms where the king would never run into her, not even by accident!' cried Bakula. 'I must go now,' said Kaumudika. 'The queen is waiting to see her new ring.'

Bakula found the dance teacher. 'Sir,' she said. 'The queen has sent me to find out about Malavika's progress in your class. Is she giving you trouble?' 'Not at all, not at all, it's quite the opposite,' said the teacher enthusiastically. 'She is so talented, so intelligent, so quick to learn! Where did the queen find her, this rare and wonderful creature?' Bakula told the teacher that Malavika had been sent to the queen by her brother who was posted at the border of the kingdom. He asked the queen to employ the girl he had sent as a gift in the palace in some artistic pursuits. 'Ah, she is a gift to me, too, this girl,' sighed the teacher as he continued on his way.

King Agnimitra was with his ministers, inquiring about the affairs of the kingdom and the safety of his borders. 'What's happening in Vidarbha?' asked the king. 'The king of Vidarbha has sent a reply to your letter in which you demanded the release of Madhavasena, who is soon to be your son-in-law, and his family,' said the minister. 'He says in his letter: "Your Majesty should know how to conduct himself when dealing with someone of equal stature. Madhavasena's sister is missing, but we are making efforts to find her. If you want Madhavasena released, then give up Mauryasachiva, my brother-in-law!"'

'Nonsense!' shouted the king. 'Does this fool really think he's my equal? Order General Virasena to implement the plan – it's time to get rid of this idiot who dares to challenge me!' 'A good idea, My Lord,' said the minister. 'He has just ascended to the throne, and this is a good time to remove him before he wins the hearts of his people.'

As the king was about to depart from his court, his friend Gautama entered. The king had previously asked Gautama to set up a secret meeting for him with Malavika, the treasured object of his recent attentions. Gautama whispered in the king's ear. 'Well done, friend, well done!' said the king, clearly very pleased with whatever Gautama had said to him. At that very moment, loud voices were heard from another room. The king's chamberlain came rushing in. 'Sire, the two dance teachers, Ganadasa and Haradatta, they wish to see you most urgently!' 'Send them in,' said the king as he sat down again. The dance teachers stumbled into the court, praising the king and his many virtues. The king called for seats for them and when they seemed more composed, he asked why they wanted to see him. Greatly agitated, interrupting one another and speaking incoherently, the teachers began to tell the king how each had insulted the other and how each was superior to the other as a teacher. They asked the king to be the judge of which of them was truly the better. The king was amused: this was a fine distraction from the important affairs of state that he had been dealing with. He said that Queen Dharini should also be a part of so major a decision, and so he summoned his wife and her friend, the nun Kaushiki.

The king welcomed his wife with affection and the nun with all the honours that were due to her. 'Take this seat,' he said to Kaushiki. 'These esteemed teachers are squabbling over who is superior. The queen and I have our favourites, but you, good lady, are truly learned and impartial. You should be the one to resolve this dispute.' Kaushiki replied, 'We know that they are both excellent dancers themselves, but the dispute is about who is the better teacher, is it not? In that case, we need to see their pupils, how they dance, how well the teacher has imparted his skills.' 'Right! Right!' shouted Gautama. 'That's the way for us to know who is better!' Ganadasa and Haradatta were both pleased with the plan, but the queen seemed displeased. 'That's not fair. What if the student is too stupid, or too untalented, or too new to fully absorb all she has been taught?' 'Surely that, too, would be the teacher's fault, for picking a poor student,' said the king. 'Your pupil is so new, Ganadasa,' said the queen quietly. 'How could she possibly have enough experience to perform in a competition?' Kaushiki chose a dance piece that both teachers had prepared with their students, and the king graciously led the queen to where they could sit comfortably and enjoy the performance. 'If only you were as clever in matters of the state,' thought the queen as she noticed the king's eagerness.

Because Ganadasa was older, he was given the honour of having his pupil perform first. The king said softly to Gautama, 'I can't wait to see that girl again!' 'Here she comes, My Lord,' Gautama whispered back. 'She is even lovelier than in the painting!' thought the king. 'I was sure that the painter had exaggerated her beauty, but the truth is, in fact, the opposite.' Ganadasa's student was Malavika and she sang a song of unrequited love, begging her beloved to come to her. 'She's singing to you, My Lord,' said Gautama. 'I know,' replied the king. 'How else could she declare her love for me in front of the queen? She has hidden her love in this song!' Malavika turned to leave the stage when she had finished, but Gautama stopped her. 'Wait, child! You haven't heard our comments on your performance.' The king almost swooned with love, noticing all her perfections as she stood before him.

Ganadasa invited Kaushiki to say what she thought. Kaushiki was full of praise for the young dancer, and Ganadasa beamed with satisfaction. But Gautama said, 'You failed in one aspect, good teacher. This is her first performance and you did not give a gift to a brahmin of good standing!' 'Sire, this is not her first performance,' said Ganadasa. 'Never mind, let me compliment the young lady with a suitable gift anyway,' said Gautama, unruffled. He slipped a bracelet off the king's arm and offered it to Malavika. 'But wait,' said the queen. 'How can you give her a prize when you haven't even seen the other dancer?' Ganadasa led Malavika away, and Gautama whispered to the king, 'This is as much as I can do for you.' The king looked downcast as Malavika left the stage. Haradatta bustled in, praising the king and announcing his student's performance. At that very moment, the town crier called midday. 'My goodness,' Gautama cried out. 'It is time for the brahmins to be fed. And your meal will be served immediately after that. Do not delay, Your Majesty, your doctors have advised a strict routine for your meals. Haradatta, can your student perform tomorrow?' A disappointed Haradatta had no choice but to surrender to the king's schedule, and the king and Gautama found themselves alone. 'My heart has been pierced by the arrows of love,' moaned the king. 'Make a plan for me to see Malavika again. I shall remain sleepless until then.'

Soon, all the palace maids were agog with the news that Malavika had won the dance contest and with rumours about the king and Malavika, and their undeclared love for each other. The morose king wandered through the palace in Gautama's company. He had grown thin and pale, pining for his new love. 'All these tears and sighs do not become you, My Lord,' said Gautama. 'I have sent Malavika your message through Bakula, but the queen guards Malavika as closely as the cobra guards the gem in his hood. Come, let us go into the pleasure garden. It is springtime: trees and bushes are in flower, the birds sing sweetly, and the breeze is laden with fragrances from the forest.'

The two men strolled into the garden, enjoying the alternating sunshine and shade, and went towards the grove where an ashoka tree grew. Malavika entered the grove, looking around distractedly. 'What is the point of being in love with a man who does not love me?' she sighed. 'How can I explain this to my friends? How long will the God of Love torment me like this?' She took a few steps and stopped. 'Where am I?' she said. 'Ah, I remember. The queen told me to stand in for her in the ritual to make the ashoka tree bloom. She would have done it herself, but she has injured her foot because of that careless man, Gautama. I am to touch the tree with my left foot, and if it flowers within five days, the queen will give me a gift, something that will make my wish come true. I seem to be in the right grove, but I'll wait for Bakula to bring me the ornaments for my feet.'

Gautama, walking ahead of the king, saw Malavika sitting sadly by herself. He alerted the king, who could not believe his luck. 'She is even more beautiful in her sadness,' he said as he gazed at the young woman, who wore her hair in a single braid and no ornaments at all. The king and Gautama hid themselves and watched the young woman as she sighed and spoke aloud to herself about her heartache. Bakula slipped into the ashoka grove, her hands filled with ornaments for Malavika's feet to prepare for her ritual at the ashoka tree. She took Malavika's feet into her lap and began to decorate them with red lac and adorn them with Queen Dharini's precious anklets. In the bushes, the king sighed deeply as he gazed upon the perfection of his beloved's foot.

Iravati, the junior queen, had also wandered into the area around the grove with her maid. She had been drinking and was a little unsteady on her feet. She was surprised to see Malavika being prepared for the ashoka tree ceremony. 'Why is she getting this honour?' she said peevishly to her maid but she was persuaded to stay silent and say no more. Bakula had finished decorating

Malavika's foot with delicate streaks of lac and was admiring her handiwork. Overcome by the beauty of the foot, she said, 'Dear Malavika, may you always be by the king's side! I know he has feelings for you, I heard him say so. Be patient. All will be well.' In her hiding place, Queen Iravati's maid gasped, 'Oh, the cheek of this serving girl, how dare she!' 'But I am so afraid of Queen Dharini!' cried Malavika. 'Promise me that you will always be my friend, whatever happens!' Bakula comforted Malavika and urged her to touch the ashoka tree which was now covered with auspicious designs and adorned with Queen Dharini's own anklet. 'Do as the queen commanded,' she said. 'Let the ashoka bloom!'

The king could wait no longer. 'Gautama,' he pleaded. 'Please, let us reveal ourselves!' 'I shall tease this young woman and make her blush,' declared his friend. He stepped out from behind the bushes. 'Oho! What is this I see? You have kicked the sacred ashoka tree? Bakula, you should know better! Why did you let her act so inappropriately?' The two young women cried out, 'It's the king, it's the king!' Iravati and her maid, who were still hidden, were equally surprised to see the king. Bakula spoke quickly: 'Sire, please, she is only obeying Queen Dharini's instructions. You must forgive her!' She threw herself at the king's feet, and Malavika did the same.

The king raised Malavika up and said, 'There is nothing to fear. You have not committed any error. But look! Your delicate foot is not injured, even though it touched the rough bark of the tree!' Malavika blushed and said, 'Let us return to the queen and tell her that we have done as she commanded.' Bakula said, 'The king must excuse us before we can leave his presence.' 'I have one condition,' said the king. 'Like this tree, I, too, have been unfulfilled this season. I, too, long for a loving touch . . . ' 'I am sure you do!'

said Iravati loudly as she entered the grove. 'Go on, Malavika, attend to your king's wishes!' 'Run!' whispered Gautama to the king. 'Or, say something quickly, say something to save your skin!' 'Dear Iravati, I was just amusing myself while I waited for you. Come, now,' cajoled the king. 'I'm sure that's true,' retorted Iravati. 'I'm only sorry I interrupted your game!' 'Our king is known for being courteous,' said Gautama, trying to pour oil on troubled waters. 'How can you be angry with him for his natural good manners when he makes small talk with his wife's maid?' 'Small talk, was it?' snorted Iravati. 'Well then, I should hardly pay it any attention.' She lifted the hem of her skirt as she flounced off, but she tripped over its hem.

The king went after her, begging her forgiveness. 'Go away, you unfaithful man!' she cried as she stumbled on. 'Unfaithful! Such harsh words for me!' said the king. 'Look, your girdle has fallen and clings to me, as you should!' Iravati tried to take the girdle from him, but the king took this opportunity to fall at her feet. 'Get up!' said Iravati, irritated with the king's antics. 'These are not Malavika's feet, that would make you feel fulfilled!' She left the grove, seething with anger.

Some days later, the king sent Gautama to bring news of Malavika. But what Gautama had to tell him was not pleasant at all. Queen Dharini had heard from Iravati about the episode by the ashoka tree and had imprisoned both Malavika and Bakula in an underground chamber. Their guard had been told that no one could see them unless they carried the queen's own signet ring. The king was terribly dejected when he heard this, but Gautama said that he had a plan, and when he whispered in the king's ear, the king began to smile. He called for Jayasena, the doorkeeper, and told Gautama to share the plan with him. Then, taking Jayasena with him, the king went to call on the queen, who was listening to Kaushiki's stories in the Room of the Breezes.

The king inquired about Dharini's injured foot with great affection, and she replied that she was, indeed, better. Just then, Gautama rushed in, heaving and panting and in a state of great agitation. He flung himself to the floor, throwing his limbs about as he moaned and groaned. 'Save me, Majesty, save me! I was bitten by a snake, a cobra, no less, when I was gathering blossoms from the ashoka tree for the queen! Save me, I beg you!' Kaushiki began to suggest that the usual remedy was to remove the poison . . . but the king interrupted and shouted to Jayasena to send for the poison master immediately. 'I am dying!' moaned Gautama. 'Sire, we have been companions since our childhood. Promise me you will look after my wife and children when I am dead!'

Jayasena came back with the message that the doctor had asked for Gautama to be brought to him without delay and that he was preparing to perform the water pot ritual for the afflicted man. For that, he would need an object decorated with the image of a snake. 'Take my ring,' said Queen Dharini quickly. 'It is marked with a snake. Return it to me as soon as the doctor has finished with it.' Another courtier came in and said that the king's ministers were waiting for him to discuss matters of state, and as the king left to join them, he suggested that his wife be taken to the inner chambers of the palace.

Instead of heading to his courtroom, the king hurried off to meet Gautama, who had executed the second part of his plan by then. 'What happened?' asked the king as soon as he saw Gautama. 'Did the guard believe you? What did you say?' Gautama replied, 'How could she refuse a messenger who carried the queen's signet ring? She had to release those poor girls. But to make it more urgent, I said that the royal astrologer had said that the king was going through a phase of bad luck and that he advised the king to pardon and release all his prisoners. But come, now! We must go quickly to where Malavika is waiting for you!'

Gautama had left Malavika and Bakula in a little house near a pond, and the two men made their way there. 'I wonder what my beloved does when she's waiting for me,' mused the king. 'Let's watch through the window.' They crept to the side of the house and listened to the young women talking. 'Greet the king, Malavika. Honour him with praise,' said Bakula. 'Where, where is he?' cried Malavika as she spun around in confusion. 'Oh, you are mean! This is just his portrait,' she said disappointed. 'But who is he looking at so lovingly?' 'That's Iravati,' replied Bakula. 'It's not very nice of him to look at only one of his women like that,' said Malavika. 'Iravati is the king's favourite,' said Bakula feeling mischievous. 'Oh, why then am I making myself so miserable with my love for him?' sighed Malavika.

The king decided that it was time to show himself. 'Lady, ignore the picture. Here I am, before you now, with only you in my heart!' Gautama and Bakula made an excuse to leave, but the king told them to keep watch and ensure that no other people came by. Gautama lay down on a crystal bench in the shade of a tree, and in minutes, he was fast asleep.

'Why are you so afraid of me?' the king asked Malavika gently. 'You should cling to me as a jasmine vine clings to a mango tree!' 'I am afraid of the queen,' said Malavika. The king tried to take Malavika in his arms, but she moved away. Meanwhile, Iravati and her maid, who were looking for Gautama, ran into Queen Dharini's attendant. She told them that the queen was no longer angry and that she had set free the two women Iravati had complained to her about. Iravati sent a message back saying she was grateful to be in the queen's favour again.

Iravati and her maid found Gautama asleep in the shade, mumbling in his sleep. They crept closer to hear what he was saying. Iravati flew into a rage when she realized that Gautama was babbling about how beautiful Malavika was and how she was the king's favourite. Her maid picked up the twisted branch of a tree that looked like a snake and threw it at Gautama. 'That'll teach this snake-fearing fellow a lesson!' she said. Gautama jumped up shouting, 'A snake! A snake! Help, help!' In a second, the king was by his friend's side, reassuring him. Iravati rushed to him. 'I see that you enjoy your flirtations in the broad daylight,' she said angrily.

The king was surprised to see Iravati and quickly tried to pretend that he was happy to have run into her. He tried to calm her down with sweet words: that she had no reason to be angry with him, that she was still his favourite, and that he had had the two women released from prison only because the festival was a day of happy celebration. But Iravati's maid arrived from Queen Dharini's chambers and whispered something in her mistress's ear. Iravati turned on Gautama. 'Your plot is unravelling, you cunning man!' she said. Gautama was saved from further abuse by a doorkeeper who ran in shouting, 'Our little princess, she has been frightened by a monkey. She is with the queen now. She is very agitated and will not calm down!' Iravati cried, 'Go to her, My Lord, she needs you!' In his heart, Gautama blessed the monkey and wiped the sweat from his brow. He hurried out with the king.

The woman who looked after the ashoka grove came into the garden saying, 'Malavika is so lucky! Look! The ashoka tree has flowered and the queen has given up her anger. But what is this hunchback Sarasaka doing here, I wonder? And why is he carrying a jewel? I shall ask him.' Sarasaka said, 'I'm taking this to the royal priest as payment for the ritual the queen requested when she learned that her son was to guard the sacrificial horse. She wants the gods to protect him. She is in the temple now, listening to the good news that her brother, Virasena, has captured the king of Vidarbha and that Madhavasena, our ally, has been set free. Madhavasena has sent the king many gifts – horses and gold coins and jewels.' The grove-keeper thanked the hunchback for the news and made her way to the queen's chambers.

Shouts of praise for the king filled the air. Gautama said, 'I heard the queen say to Kaushiki that she should dress Malavika in bridal splendour. I think she intends to make you happy.' 'Dharini always has my happiness at heart – once she gets over her rage!' said the king. A doorkeeper announced that the queen wanted to enjoy the pleasure of viewing the flowering ashoka tree in the king's company and that she was making her way to the grove at that very moment with her retinue of attendants, including Malavika.

Queen Dharini greeted the king with all courtesy when he entered the grove and pointed out the beauty of the flowering tree. The royal chamberlain joined them with news about the victory over Vidarbha. 'Among the gifts from Vidarbha are these two girls, skilled in all the arts. They are now ready for an audience with you.' He summoned the girls and presented them to the king. The girls honoured the king and received his greetings. 'What arts are you skilled in, my dears?' he asked. 'We can sing,' they said, and the king offered one of them to Dharini. The queen called Malavika and asked which of the girls she would like as a companion. The moment the girls saw Malavika, they fell to their knees, whispering to each other, 'This is our king's daughter!' 'What is this?' said the king. 'Who are you? Who is she?' 'Your forces released Prince Madhavasena from captivity. This is his sister!' 'Oh no! I imprisoned a woman of royal birth!' cried Queen Dharini. 'But how did she get here?' said the king, his confusion increasing. One of the girls said, 'When the prince was imprisoned by his wicked kinsman, his loyal minister, Sumati, quickly sent away the prince's sister.' 'Yes, yes, we know that part,' said the king impatiently. 'Then what happened?'

Kaushiki stepped forward. 'Let me tell you the rest,' she said quietly. The girls said to each other, 'Can that be Kaushiki? We didn't recognize her, dressed as a nun!' Gautama broke in, 'Will someone tell us the rest of the story, please!' Kaushiki said, 'I am the sister of Sumati, the minister. When Madhavasena was captured, Sumati fled with Malavika and me, and hoping to reach you, he joined a caravan of merchants. But when we entered a forest, we were attacked by a band of thieves and the soldiers who accompanied the caravan vanished. Sumati was killed while he was trying to protect Malavika. I fainted with grief, and when I came back to consciousness, Malavika was nowhere to be found. I only saw her again when we both became part of the queen's retinue. I learned that Malavika had been rescued by forest dwellers and handed over to the queen.' 'But why didn't you tell us who she was?' spluttered the queen. 'I had a reason, My Lady,' said Kaushiki. 'A fortune teller said, long ago, that Malavika would make a very good marriage only after she had lived for a year as a serving girl. I decided to help this wonderful prophecy come true, so I kept silent.'

'All's well that ends well,' said the king relieved. 'And we have just received news that our son, who was protecting the sacrificial horse, has been victorious against an army that challenged him.' The queen was delighted and, in her happiness, she sent one of her maids to the inner chambers to tell Iravati that she should forget all that had happened and embrace Malavika as a friend rather than treat her as a rival for the king's affections. She said to Kaushiki, 'As the minister Sumati had intended, I will now ask King Agnimitra to take Malavika as a wife.' 'Dear Dharini,' said Agnimitra. 'I knew you had my welfare at heart. May you always love me and may I always live under your generous gaze!'