

# The Novice on the Threshold of Royalty: Anxieties and Apprehensions in *Kādambarī*

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## *Abstract*

The royal power is represented in Indian literature often in contrasting ways, as the seat of glory on one hand and as an allurements for evil leading one to ultimate fall on the other. Veteran statesmen like Kauṭilya, even while dilating the pomp and power of royalty have taken great pains to highlight the temptations and lapses which may prove to be the formula for the down fall of the king. A young prince on the threshold of royalty thus assumes tremendous psychological significance as he is to embark on an unknown way of life beset with uncertainties. It is remarkable that in *Kādambarī*, Bānabhaṭṭa has captured exactly such a moment of transition, when the young prince Candrāpīḍa, about to assume the throne comes to visit Śukanāsa, the veteran minister. The long piece of advice meted out to him by Śukanāsa, celebrated for its worldly wisdom and political acumen, is also a document portraying the transition point of a virtuous prince from innocence to maturity. The present paper will explore the anxieties and apprehensions expressed in Śukanāsa's advice and the ritualistic, psychological and philosophical dimensions of the transition as represented in the discourse.

*Keywords:* *Kādambarī*, kingship, *Arthaśāstra*, royal court, *Harṣacarita*.

## 1. *Introduction*

Kingship is the most powerful institution constituting the nucleus of a monarchical state. As a cultural construct in ancient India, it has several layers of discourses contributing to its complex and sometimes contradictory nature. These layers include origination myths, royalty-related rituals, literary representations of

kings, prescriptions in *smṛti* texts and manuals like the *Arthaśāstra*. Some origination myths uphold the consensual nature and the congeniality of royalty as the ideal, as epitomised in concepts like that of the *mahāsammata*, the ‘Great Chosen One’. On the other hand, myths favouring the divinity of the king underline the unquestionable nature and implicit infallibility of the institution<sup>1</sup>. Various rituals related to the king’s coronation and sacrifices like the *rājasūya* and the *vājapeya* seem to reinforce the divinity of the king. The vulnerability of the office of the king and the inevitable fall of an undesirable ruler are also themes of sensitive description. Works like the *Mṛcchakaṭīka* and treatises like the *Arthaśāstra* deal with the downfall of despots. Veteran statesmen as he is, Kauṭilya, even while dilating the pomp and power of royalty took great pains to highlight the temptations and lapses which may prove to be the formula for the king’s downfall<sup>2</sup>. In short, while kingship represents glory and power, it is also not unaccompanied by grave dangers from within and without. While the name of a successful ruler is preserved for posterity as a model of good governance, failed kings bring ruin to themselves and the state they rule.

It is because of these vagaries of statecraft that the assumption of royal power becomes a moment of great anxiety for the country at large in general and for those close to the king in particular. Kings, despite the almost superhuman aura thrust on them in traditional societies, are also human beings vulnerable to temptations and follies, and one bad move on their part may cost them all their power and prestige. In this complex cultural background, the transition of an individual from his normal life to kingship is an event of momentous significance. For a prince, the crucial moment represents a transition from a carefree life to stressful officialdom and from innocence to maturity. The transition can also be beset with uncertainties and reversals, as the stories of both the two epics *Rāmāyaṇa* and *Mahābhārata* seem to demonstrate. In the former, Rāma, the heir apparent loses the crown as soon as he gains it, while in the latter, a great fratricidal war is fought to determine succession. Unfortunately, such a liminal situation is seldom discussed in Indian literature with its inner complexities.

1. Basham 1989, 82-84.

2. Rangarajan 1992, 121.

2. *The Śukanāśopadeśa or 'Śukanāśa's advice' in Kādambarī of Bāṇabhaṭṭa*

In these circumstances, the celebrated section known as 'Śukanāśa's advice' (*śukanāśopadeśa*) in the prose romance *Kādambarī* (K) of Bāṇabhaṭṭa assumes tremendous significance due to the sidelights it sheds on royalty and the societal anxieties it shares at the time of transition of power. As the term implies, the *śukanāśopadeśa* is a long and elaborate piece of advice given by Śukanāśa, the seasoned minister of king Tārāpīḍa, to Candrāpīḍa, when the young prince, about to assume the throne comes to visit the former.

Bāṇabhaṭṭa had first-hand knowledge of the royal court of ancient India which he portrayed realistically in *Harṣacarita* (HC), a biography on his patron king. Like the *Harṣacarita*, *Kādambarī* also centres on the lives of royalty. The main characters are Tārāpīḍa and Candrāpīḍa, the king and the royal prince, belonging to Ujjayinī. The author has made deft use of his knowledge deriving from his intimate connection with the royal court to depict aspects of court life in both these works.

Bāṇa's *Kādambarī* falls under the category of prose fiction (*kathā*) in Sanskrit literature and is written in a heavily ornamented style with figurative expressions, especially word play based on *double entendre*. However, neither the fictitious nature of the narrative nor its ornamental style detracts one from the message Bāṇa wishes to convey through the lengthy discourse put in the mouth of the seasoned minister: being selected for ascendancy to royal power is a crucial moment in the life of a prince and its implications must be squarely faced by the novice. Bāṇa here captures a liminal moment in the life of a prince where he has to select a path either leading to further glory or to total destruction.

It is perhaps a bit disappointing that Bāṇa did not care to depict the excitement and anxieties of Candrāpīḍa himself who is the crown-designate and who is thus on the threshold of a career and assignment which is going to radically transform his life and attitudes. Perhaps a frank description of the existential dilemmas of a prospective king must have been looked upon as a confession of the weakness of that particular person. Be that as it may, Bāṇa prefers sharing the perceptions of the society at large when a young person assumes royal office. He makes the context an occasion for a sagacious and wise minister to share the genuine misgivings of his well-wishers. The message is clear: however learned, noble, high born, firm minded, preserving and alert a person is, wealth and power turn him into a wicked person. Royalty is dreadful because of 'thousands of extremely crooked and

painful practices<sup>3</sup>. The anxieties and apprehensions expressed in Śukanāsa's advice and the ritualistic, psychological and philosophical dimensions of the transition as represented in the discourse deserve closer scrutiny. It may be that these sentiments are neither character specific nor context specific and may apply to any such person facing a similar situation. In this regard, the advice needs to be de-contextualised and viewed against the backdrop of kingship and attendant dangers.

A factor enhancing the liminal nature of the transition is that it also synchronises with Candrāpīḍa's transition from childhood to youth. Youth is the age which produces greatest infatuation. Śukanāsa makes it clear that youth is a sensitive period of time in the case of any individual and its effects are more far reaching in the case of a prince. As if this is not enough, all this is further amplified by some other factors too. Actually, Candrāpīḍa has to be extra vigilant due to the combined effects of being rich at the time of his birth, his fresh youth, handsome nature and extraordinary physical strength. Each of these four factors is enough to make one mischievous and one can only imagine the havoc brought about by all of them working in tandem. This is the justification Śukanāsa offers for the long piece of advice he gives to the prince.

Śukanāsa pointedly refers to knaves, rogues, gallants, servants, enticing women, royal glory, arrogance, passion, sensual pleasures and luxury as attendant evils in the career of the prospective king. He is extremely anxious about any lapse on the part of the prince which would make him an object of ridicule in the eyes of the people. The ideal king envisaged in the words of the minister should be above the censure of the good people. He should not be the object of condemnation of the elderly people. He should not give any occasion for reproach from friends. He must not be an object of grief for the wise<sup>4</sup>.

An important aspect of royalty surfacing time and again in Śukanāsa's discourse is the dehumanised atmosphere in a royal court where in power is centred on a single individual whose judgment could be clouded by the pomp and pageantry of the royal court. This is a sensitive issue which Bāṇa has to handle in his works also in some other contexts. It seems that in his view, it is more the system than the individuals which is at fault. In *Harṣacarita*, Bāṇa frankly recounts the embarrassing experience he had faced when he visited Harṣavardhana in his royal court for the first time. Bāṇa had admittedly lived a restrained less bohemian life

3. Kale 1968, 179.

4. K 179: *tathā prayatethāḥ yathā na upahāsyase janair na nindyase sādhubhir na dhikkriyase gurubhir na upālabhyase suhr̥dbhir na śocyase vidvadbhiḥ* //. Edition and translation after Kale 1968.

in his youth in the company of friends of his own age, ‘to the derision of the great’ (*mahatāmupahāsyatām*)<sup>5</sup>, but he was upset at the cold reception accorded to him in the royal court. When Bāṇa approached the royal presence, the elephant *mahout*, through a verse composed extempore, asked the elephant to give up his anger and behave properly, which was actually a dig at Bāṇa and his character. The king’s behaviour was no less humiliating. On learning that his visitor is Bāṇa, the king says that he is not going to see him, adding that the latter is a paramour. Bāṇa was not prepared to let this remark go unchallenged and he tells the king in no uncertain words that it was not proper for the latter to form an opinion of him based on the opinions of others. He makes a stout defence of his own lineage and learning and convinces the king of his worth. This incident must have led Bāṇa to realise that the kings are often led to prejudice and preconceived notions on the basis of the input they receive from sycophants.

That Bāṇa had no illusions about the estrangement between the king and his subjects is clear from another context in the *Harṣacarita* wherein the king orders a march against the enemies. Here the whole countryside comes in eager haste, curious to see the king. The villagers come with presents of curds, molasses, candied sugar, and flowers in baskets, demanding the protection of the crops:

flying before their terror of irate and savage chamberlains, they yet in spite of distance, tripping, and falling, kept their eyes fixed upon the king, bringing to light imaginary wrongs of former governors, lauding hundreds of past officials, reporting ancient misdeeds of knaves<sup>6</sup>.

Bāṇa also records that «some, contented with the appointed overseers, were bawling their eulogies: “The king is Dharma incarnate”; others, despondent at the plunder of their ripe grain, had come forth with their wives and all to bemoan their estates, and at the imminent risk of their lives, grief dismissing fear, had begun to censure their sovereign, crying “Where’s the king? What right has he to be king? What a king!”»<sup>7</sup>.

5. Kane 1997, 19.

6. HC 113: *upāyanīkṛtadadhigudakhaṇḍakusumakaraṇḍair dhanaghaṭitapeṭakair sarabhasamsamutsardbhīḥ prakupitapracāṇḍadaṇḍivtrāsanavidrutardūragatair apiskhaladbhir apīpatadbhir apīnarendranīhitadṣṭībīḥ //*. Edition after Kane 1997; I have adopted the translation by E. B. Cowell and F. W. Thomas (1897, 208).

7. HC 113: *aparair adīṣṭaparīpālakapurūṣaparitūṣṭair dharmāḥ pratyakṣo devaḥ iti stutīr ātanvadbhir aparair lūyamānaniṣpannasasyaprakāṭitaviṣāḍaiḥ kṣetraśucāsakuṭumbair iva nirgataiḥ prarūdhaprāṇachedaiḥ paritāpatyājītabhayaiḥ kva rājā kuto rājā kīdṛśo vā rājā iti*

It may also be recalled that Bāṇa paid scant respect to the theory of the divine origin of Kings. Basham rightly points out that in ancient India, between the mystical and contractual theories on the origin of monarchy, it was the former which «carried most weight, at least in thought»<sup>8</sup>. Even the *Arthasāstra*, which had no illusion about the human nature of the king, found legends reiterating the divinity of kings of great propaganda value. While the Buddhists and Jainas explicitly denied the divinity of the king, Bāṇa went to the extent of calling his bluff describing it as the «work of sycophants who befuddled the minds of weak and stupid monarchs»<sup>9</sup>. He upheld a more humanistic perception of kingship and idealised kingship in fictitious characters and historical personages alike in his writings.

Bāṇa, through the words of Śukanāsa, analyses the process of the king's coronation without being overwhelmed by its mystifying nature. According to Śukanāsa, the various rituals associated with the coronation ceremony are actually various steps in the process of the dehumanisation of the king. It is significant that the myth of divinity was reinforced by the various rituals at the time of the king's coronation. According to Arnold van Gennep, «the ceremonies of enthronement or crowning show a very great resemblance to ordination ceremonies, both in detail and their order»<sup>10</sup>. He lists the handing over and acceptance of the sacra, including drums, sceptre, crown and a special seat. In the Indian context, the ceremonies include the construction of a sacred altar in a special pavilion with four pillars, the pouring of the water from sacred places in golden pitchers on the head of the king seated there, the Brahmin gift of the sacred *dūrvā* grass, sprouts of the barley plant, bark of the *plakṣa* tree, and the *madhuka* flower, the recitation of *Atharvaveda mantras*, the gifts of dress and ornaments to the prospective king seated on an ivory seat, and the handing of the royal paraphernalia to him<sup>11</sup>. The ritual culminated in the king's journey to the assembly hall, and him sitting on the royal throne. Finally, he takes the sceptre and goes out in the streets of his capital riding on an elephant.

Bāṇa almost demystifies the coronation ceremony by asserting that each of the rituals is aimed at dehumanising and alienating the prospective king from the common folk and a life of morality. Here the speech of Śukanāsa becomes highly figurative and demonstrates how the elaborate rituals symbolically transform the incumbent and put him in a very vulnerable position susceptible to evil influences.

*prārabdhanaranāthanindam* //. Edition after Kane 1997; I have adopted the translation by E. B. Cowell and F. W. Thomas (1897, 208-209).

8. Basham 1989, 84.

9. *Ibid.*, 84.

10. van Gennep 1960, 110.

11. Upadhyaya 1968, 92-93.

Thus, the very water poured on the kings at the time of coronation removes any trace of kindness in them. The smoke emitted from the fire altar itself makes his heart dirty. The patience of the king is removed by the broom made of the *kuśa* grass held by the priest. Any remembrance of old age is concealed by the silken head-gear. The perception of the other world is covered by the royal umbrella. The breeze from the chowries itself removes truthful speech. The good qualities are chased away by the cane. The beneficial advice is drowned in the din made by the sounds of hail. Fame is rubbed away by the foliage in the form of the royal flag. The resulting aloofness of the king-designate and his vulnerability are the sensitive points of concern for those who have hitherto been close to him.

Two other important points stressed by Bāṇa in the discourse are related to the changes brought about by wealth and sycophancy in a king. Here he uses extremely figurative language to drive home the passionate nature, perversity, instability, delusiveness, arrogance and cruelty brought about by wealth in a human being. Wealth, personified as the goddess Lakṣmī spurs a person to act in a wicked manner and the kings coming under her spell become arrogant and cruel, and insensitive to good advice. Sycophancy is another great evil which deludes a king and leads him to self-deception. Bāṇa describes sycophants as vultures devouring the flesh of wealth. They represent evils like hunting, drinking, arrogance and moral turpitude as good things and thus set a trap for the vulnerable king. The kings start believing that they are divine incarnations and behave accordingly, eschewing the company of good people.

### 3. Conclusions

Finally, we can see that Bāṇa shows his critical attitude towards not only the initiation rites of the king, but also the text books like that of Kauṭilya which are devoid of any compassion, consisting as they do of cruel advice, and the means of valid knowledge in statecraft<sup>12</sup>. The transformation of a good human being into an in-human despot will be complete with such paraphernalia. It seems that it is only at the critical juncture on the eve of the coronation that a sensible minister can show the ideal path. Through Śukanāsa, Bāṇa was probably sharing the anxieties and apprehensions of a humane poet with prospective kings, if not with king Harṣa himself, whom he started admiring and trusting after their initial meeting.

12. For an account of Bāṇa's critical spirit as reflected in *Harṣacarita*, and *Kādambarī*, see Devahuti 1998, 11-14.

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