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ŚAKTIBHADRA'S ĀŚCARYACŪDĀMAṆI
AN APPRECIATION IN THE LIGHT OF VĀLMĪKI RĀMĀYAṆA

The *Āścaryacūdāmaṇi* (ĀCū.) of Śaktibhadra is a noteworthy Sanskrit play in seven acts on the *Rāmāyaṇa* theme. This play has been very well known only in Kerala for nearly ten centuries, since it is one of the most important plays in the repertoire of Kūḍiyāṭṭam, the Sanskrit theatre tradition prevalent in Kerala from the 9th century and exclusively performed by the Cākyār community. Early editions of the text in Kerala are known and it has been rendered into Malayalam in the late 19th century by Kodungallur Kunjikuttan Tampuran¹.

It was Prof. Kuppuswami Sastri who brought ĀCū. to the notice of scholars outside Kerala and India by his illuminating introduction to the edition brought out in 1926 through the Balamanorama Press at Madras. In his review of this edition by Prof. Kuppuswami Sastri, Dr. L.D. Barnett² called ĀCū. as «one of the best of the Rāma plays, and one that deserves to be included in the list of classics and studied as such».

In an article contributed to *Prof. Kuppuswami Sastri Commemoration Volume*³ Prof. M. Winternitz paid a tribute to its «dramatic action and appropriateness for stage as surpassing even the *Uttararāmacarita* of Bhavabhūti». He added – «Its characteristic feature is

1. Trichur, 1893.

2. JRAS (1927), p. 353.

3. Madras, 1935, pp. 3-8.

such a captivating beauty, and in excitement says – «What is the source of this precious wonder (*āścaryaratna*) with long eyes and extraordinary beauty? Could it have come from heaven or earth?» (I.6).

*asyātimātrāyatalocanasya,
natabhruṇaḥ kamrapayodharasya /
āścaryaratnasya vilāsayoneḥ
kimākarō dyaur nu vasundharā nu //*

The passionate Śūrpaṅakhā is then presented as a strange contrast to the sublime love between Rāma and Sītā, the ideal couple who, sacrificing the rich royal life at Ayodhyā, find the forest life superior even to the city life (I.12).

Second act.

In the background of such calm incidents of the first act appear fierce incidents that happen on earth and in the mid-air in the *second act*. Firstly, the attractive Śūrpaṅakhā is tossed between Rāma and Lakṣmaṇa. With a vengeance then, she takes up her demoniac form; «with her terrible canine teeth, and body dark as a cloud», she strikes terror even in Rāma who had killed demonesses like Tāṭakā (II.5).

*bhīmadamṣṭram-aruṇordhva-mūrdhajam
śailavarṣma jalododara-cchavi /
tāṭakām hatavatas-tato 'pi me
rūpametadavaśam bhayāvaham //*

Śūrpaṅakhā then takes up Lakṣmaṇa in the air in order to kill him. In anger Lakṣmaṇa cuts off her ears and nose. Under such ghastly conditions Śūrpaṅakhā again appears on the scene «with her body red with flowing blood, like a row of dark Tamāla trees receiving the morning sunlight on the slope of a mountain coloured with fluid minerals» (II.15). In utter disappointment the demoness vows to take vengeance on Rāma and Lakṣmaṇa appropriately.

Third act.

Act III is the longest and like the central pendant of a necklace, shines to advantage, and is very important in the development of the *adbhuta rasa*. It packs up many incidents quite effectively and pre-

sents a series of several wonderful pictures enriching the main *rasa*. They are:

1. The gifts from sages in the Daṇḍaka forest, of a unique armour to Lakṣmaṇa as protection of his vulnerable parts of the body from the demons' arrows, a wondrous ring to Rāma and a miraculous crest-jewel to Sītā, which when worn by them, would reveal the deceitful magic of demons.

2. Appearance of Mārīca as a golden deer with gem-studded neck illuminating the entire forest, making Sītā excitedly say, that the forest life is abundantly rich with wonderful sights (*āryaputra, adbhuta-darśana-bahurasah khalu vananivāsaḥ* – II.12/13).

3. Rāvaṇa comes to the Daṇḍaka forest with Śūrpaṇakhā in a chariot, when Rāma goes out in search of the deer. He greatly admires Sītā's beauty; after the departure of Lakṣmaṇa at Sītā's instigation, Rāvaṇa and the charioteer meet the lonely Sītā in the guise respectively of Rāma and Lakṣmaṇa. Sītā takes Rāvaṇa as real Rāma, and accepts to go with him in the chariot to Ayodhyā, where Rāma has to safeguard Bharata from the onslaught of his fresh enemies.

4. The real Rāma comes to the forest after killing Mārīca, only to be joined by Śūrpaṇakhā who awaits him in the guise of Sītā. Meanwhile the real Sītā travelling in the aerial vehicle sees her own counterpart and the real Rāma, down in the forest region. But she goes with Rāvaṇa thinking him to be Rāma himself.

5. Subsequently Rāma meets Lakṣmaṇa weeping bitterly at the dead Mārīca disguised as Rāma. To avoid further confusion, wearing the magical ring, Rāma approaches the dead body of Mārīca, which is immediately turned into the original demoniac form. Similarly when Rāma wipes the tears in the counterfeit Sītā's face her real form as Śūrpaṇakhā is revealed.

Thus with two sets of Rāma, Sītā and Lakṣmaṇa, and a third Rāma represented by the dead Mārīca in the third act, a number of emotional conflicts are depicted, excitement reaches the peak, and opportunities are afforded for the sudden change of personalities on account of the magical powers of the ring. The *adbhuta rasa* in varied hues appears throughout. The one-sided love (*śṛṅgāra-ābhāsa*) of Rāvaṇa, and the revengeful attitude of Śūrpaṇakhā towards Rāma, running as undercurrent feelings, enrich the dominant *adbhuta rasa*.

Fourth act.

The *fourth act* is brief but it sustains partly the height of *adbhuta* reached in the previous act. This act describes crisply the travel of Sītā and Rāvaṇa from the Daṇḍaka forest to Laṅkā. Rāvaṇa is here depicted not only as a passionate lover but unusually as a person who finds it so difficult to make love to Sītā at close quarters. Finally he decides to go near her under the pretext of tying up her dishevelled hair. At that time his Rākṣasa form is immediately revealed through the crest jewel on Sītā's head. Hearing the desperate cries of Sītā, Jaṭāyus comes, and fighting against Rāvaṇa, dies. While Sītā's discovery for the real nature of Rāvaṇa maintains the *adbhuta* motif, the continued one-sided love of Rāvaṇa and the pathetic feelings roused on account of the death of Jaṭāyus, prove a check to it to reach its peak as has happened in the third act.

The incidents of the first four acts of ĀCū., a major part of which are laid in the Daṇḍaka forest, follow one another closely.

Fifth act.

The location for the *fifth act* however shifts to Laṅkā. In its prelude (*Praveśaka*) Maṇḍodarī is presented in her apartments as telling her maid about the inauspicious dreams that she had lately, and which portended calamity to Rāvaṇa and Laṅkā. This is followed by the passionate Rāvaṇa meeting the chaste Sītā in the Aśoka grove and the latter's resolute refusal of the demon's advances to her. The dominant *rasa* is of course love in separation (*vipralambha śṛṅgāra*). Śaktibhadra uniquely delineates two types of this love. In Rāvaṇa it is the objectionable unrequited love (*vipralambha-śṛṅgāra-ābhāsa*), while in Sītā it is the sublimely divine love that is intensified due to her separation from Rāma. In and through these love-delineations appear glimpses of *adbhuta*-elements, – like for example, the context where Maṇḍodarī, wonders at Sītā's chastity that results in her harsh words to Rāvaṇa, and also exclaims (V.30/31):

«A resolute woman is she; she draws her feet from the head of

His Majesty Rāvaṇa as she would from dust; the rumour that Sītā is Mother Earth, and Rāma Viṣṇu, is now proved to be true».

*dhīrā khalv eṣā mahārājasya śrīṣam paṅkam iva pādena pariharati /
satyam idānīm kauḷīnam prithvisutā sītā, padmanabho rāma iti //*

In her sincere admiration of Sītā, Maṇḍodarī even goes to the extent of giving her own life to save Sītā from Rāvaṇa's attempt to kill her (V.32/33).

«Alas, it has come to this! Sītā is a chaste wife. With my life I will save her from the danger of the King killing her». (So saying Maṇḍodarī quickly moves forward and stands between Sītā and Rāvaṇa).

*hā dhik, tathāsīt, pativratā khalveṣā, /
mama prāṇaiḥ mahārājasya anarthāt
rakṣisyāmi / (tūrṇam-upetya tayor madhye
sthitivā)*

Sixth act.

In *act VI* the scene of action continues to be the Aśoka grove. In the course of faithfully recounting the story in the *Sundara Kāṇḍa* of *Vālmīki Rāmāyaṇa* Śaktibhadra describes the miraculous feats of Hanumān, who is himself an embodiment of all that is wonderful. The monkey presents the wondrous ring to Sītā along with Rāma's message of hope; he also takes to Rāma Sītā's sweet message and the wonderful crest jewel: Sītā herself describes the ill luck of the ring (VI.14/15).

«This is the ornament of Rāma who is an ornament to the world, (*idam lokābharanasya ābharanam*). This reveals the deceit of demons (*idam rākṣasamāyā-piśunam*). This is a jewel lamp at night. This is a substitute mirror for adorning the face».

So saying Sītā with excitement puts the ring on her tresses, brings it to her face, presses it closely to her tender arms, – wears it on each of her slender fingers, and gazes at it, engrossed in thought, tranquil and with moist eyes. (Verse 14).

Seventh act.

The concluding *seventh act* fittingly describes Sītā's fire ordeal as «a wonder amongst all wonders». For, as described in the ĀCū. all the gods, sages including Nārada, and Rāma's ancestors from Manu to Daśaratha, appear before Rāma to vouch for the purity of his faithful wife Sītā; Nārada himself arranges to bring the heavenly car Puṣpaka in which Rāma and Sītā, along with their retinue are to be taken to Ayodhyā.

Two motifs in ĀCū. in the light of Vālmīki Rāmāyaṇa

I. A major innovation in ĀCū. is the miraculous Cūḍāmaṇi given to Sītā by the sages; this figures in the title of the play; along with it is the complement of Rāma's ring endowed with the same miraculous powers.

As is well known these two jewels already occur in the *Vālmīki Rāmāyaṇa* where they just figure in the *Sundara Kāṇḍa* (Vani Vilas Press ed., *sargas* 36, 38; Gorresio ed., *sargas* 32, 36) as tokens of recognition, exchanged along with information of a private nature, between Rāma and Sītā through Hanumān. But the ornaments are invested with magical powers, and assume great importance in ĀCū. as seen above. The main intention of the sages in presenting them to Rāma and Sītā is specially to protect them from the fraudulent activities of the demons in the Daṇḍaka forest. In order that the jewels do play an important role during the stay of Rāma and Sītā in the Daṇḍaka, the necessity arises to depict such deceptive actions on the part of the rākṣasas. Śaktibhadra in this connection, introduces the idea of duplicity and triplicity of characters. Thus there are two extra Rāmas, one played by Rāvaṇa while kidnapping Sītā; another by Mārīca, who first appears as an enchanting deer, later imitates the voice of Rāma when the latter aimed arrows at him, and finally dies in the guise of Rāma when hit by Rāma's arrow. Besides Rāma, there are duplicates of Lakṣmaṇa and Sītā also, as played respectively by the charioteer of Rāvaṇa and Śūrpaṅkhā.

This device of trickery of Rākṣasa is also not a pure invention of Śaktibhadra as the demons are well known for such deceptions; Vālmīki too refers to them in many contexts in the *Āraṇya* and in the *Sundara Kāṇḍas*. Vālmīki himself presents Mārīca as a golden deer; Rāvaṇa is described in many places as Kāmarūpa etc. (one taking any form at will) and while taking away Sītā he comes as a mendicant.

It is noteworthy that as a keen student of Vālmīki, and as one endowed with a fertile imagination Śaktibhadra has quite skilfully worked out the device of the false Rāmas, Lakṣmaṇa and Sītā. This innovation is important for the following reasons.

1. It is quite appropriate in the context of the first four acts of the play describing the incidents in the Daṇḍaka region.

2. It animates the theme with gripping interest and excitement.

3. It presents Rāvaṇa and Sītā in the kidnapping incident in a different light. Initially, Sītā is not averse to going with Rāvaṇa as he is in Rāma's guise. Unlike in the *Vālmīki Rāmāyaṇa* she voluntarily accompanies the counterfeit Rāma, sincerely believing the false Lakṣmaṇa's report (III. 32/33) that they three have to go to Ayodhyā in a miraculous aerial chariot to save Bharata from the attack of his enemies. Rāvaṇa too is not the threatening mendicant forcibly carrying away Sītā against her protests, tears and curses (*Vālmīki Rāmāyaṇa*, Vani Vilas ed., *Āraṇya*, *sarga* 56; Gorresio ed., *Āraṇya*, *sarga* 55). In fact the demon is presented in a favourable light; for, although Sītā implicitly believes him and is by his side, he as Rāma, is not at all able to go near and make love to her. Śaktibhadra has beautifully depicted this attitude of Rāvaṇa in acts III and IV. In one context (III. 33) he says – «She has no doubt in her mind about my identity as Rāma, yet I dare not touch her. Approaching women whom one sees for the first time is indeed difficult».

*mayi buddhyāpyasandigdhamimām na spraṣṭmutsahe /
aho tatpūrvadṛṣṭānām kaṣṭhaḥ strīṇām samāgamaḥ //*

In yet another context (IV.3) he says – «My arm is not able to touch the wife of the ascetic Rāma, that arm whose prowess is not obstructed even when I am face to face with Indra's powerful elephant».

The revelation of the original frightful appearance of Rāvaṇa in

ĀCū. is more dramatic and appealing than in the original VRā. In Vālmiki⁷ the sequence of events is as follows:

1. Rāvaṇa comes to Sītā's cottage as an ascetic, reciting Vedic *mantras*.

2. Sītā who is alone receives him with due hospitality.

3. Praising her beauty and indicating his own love for her, Rāvaṇa wants to know her personal details.

4. Sītā informs Rāvaṇa of the same. Sītā asks him about himself.

5. He announces himself as Rāvaṇa, who is passionately in love with her; he also tells her of his great lineage and attainments, that Rāma is no match for her and that she should come with him to Laṅkā to enjoy all materialistic pleasures.

6. Sītā says that he would not live any more if he decides to carry her away to Laṅkā.

7. Immediately Rāvaṇa takes up his fierce form; seizing her by her hair and her thighs, he mounts her in the chariot.

8. Sītā bewails piteously, and cries out for Rāma and curses Rāvaṇa.

9. Under these conditions she sees Jaṭāyus and asks him to convey to Rāma and Lakṣmaṇa the grave disaster that has befallen on her.

As a powerful drama ĀCū. narrates the same incident in acts II and III as follows:

1. When Lakṣmaṇa leaves Sītā at her instigation, at the very same place, Rāvaṇa, as Rāma, meets her when she is alone.

2. The charioteer as planned by Rāvaṇa, comes as Lakṣmaṇa and informs the false Rāma that the three of them are going to Ayodhyā to safeguard Bharata from the attacks on his kingdom. Sītā willingly goes with them in the chariot.

3. Rāma, after killing Mārīca comes with a false Sītā (or Śūrpaṇakhā).

4. Now Rāma sees high up in the aerial chariot his counterpart with Lakṣmaṇa and Sītā.

5. Real Sītā in the aerial chariot too is confused on seeing her counterpart and another Rāma below in the forest.

7. Vani Vilas ed., *sargas* 46-52; Gorresio ed., 52-57.

6. The false Rāma tells her that the one below is not real. Sītā is satisfied and continues her travel with pseudo Rāma and pseudo Lakṣmaṇa.

7. Rāvaṇa in the chariot enthusiastically tries all his means to make love to Sītā but he fails at every step. Finally, determined to touch her, he goes close to her under the pretext of typing up her dishevelled hair.

8. His Rākṣasa form is immediately revealed on account of the crest jewel adorning Sītā's hair.

9. Sītā is puzzled at this unwanted change. Being afraid of Rāvaṇa's terrific form, she turns to the false Lakṣmaṇa. The latter, seeing no point in his new role assumes his original form of charioteer.

10. Sītā then cries out desperately.

11. Jaṭāyus, announcing himself as Daśaratha's friend, stops the chariot and offers to fight against Rāvaṇa. The disappointed Rāvaṇa cuts off his wings and angrily continues his journey to Laṅkā.

It is clear from the above that in retelling Vālmīki's story, about the crucial incident of Rāvaṇa taking away Sītā, Śaktibhadra's dramatic skill is seen at its best. The magical power of Cūḍāmaṇi is shown as a bold contrast to and a balancing force of the deception of Rāvaṇa. The excitement caused by this event is quickly followed by the piteous situation in which Sītā is placed; this pity is further increased by the death of Jaṭāyus in her very presence.

II. A second important incident in which Śaktibhadra uses a motif in VRā. for a better purpose is the behaviour of Rāma towards Sītā after his killing Rāvaṇa. This event as described by Vālmīki has always been subjected to criticism. Poets and playwrights have tried to improve upon the original epic. Śaktibhadra is to be congratulated for giving a more dignified account of this incident by introducing some minor changes in the original and by providing a plausible reason for the sudden behaviour of Rāma towards Sītā.

We may now see, as in the previous case, the highlights of this episode as given by Vālmīki⁸.

8. *Yuddha Vani Vilas* ed. 111-25; *Gorresio* ed. 95-106.

1. After Rāma killed Rāvaṇa, the gods who come to witness the fight go to their respective places. Vibhīṣaṇa is coronated as king of Laṅkā.

2. Rāma asks Hanumān to go and inform Sītā about the welfare of Lakṣmaṇa himself, and of his killing Rāvaṇa.

3. Hanumān informs Sītā accordingly; then he conveys to Rāma Sītā's message that she is eager to meet Rāma and Lakṣmaṇa, since their purpose has been accomplished.

4. Rāma sends Vibhīṣaṇa to her with a special message that she should come well dressed and ornamented.

5. Sītā would personally like to come only in her simple dress that she was wearing during her separation. But much against her wish, to satisfy Rāma, she is decorated, mounted in a palanquin, and is brought with honour due to her as Rāma's wife, her path being cleared by an advance party.

6. Rāma tells Vibhīṣaṇa – «Let Sītā be brought to me immediately». Since there was a large crowd of demons, monkeys and others who were curious to see Sītā, her path had to be cleared with many servants; consequently confused noises were heard.

7. Rāma resents to this fuss being created for the arrival of Sītā. Moreover he says – «Let Sītā not have the curtain, veil, and other paraphernalia as is provided for a royal queen; she has been under great suffering, and now the war is just coming to a close and not yet over. Under special circumstances like these, women can come openly without much ado».

8. Lakṣmaṇa, Hanumān, Sugrīva and others are surprised at these words of Rāma. Sītā comes without any retinue, being led only by Vibhīṣaṇa; feeling shy of the public all round she covers her face with a cloth. Weeping, she approaches Rāma and looks at him.

9. Seeing her at close quarters Rāma says angrily – «I was able to kill the powerful Rāvaṇa by my might and the efforts of friends like Hanumān, Sugrīva and Vibhīṣaṇa. However, the calumny brought about by Rāvaṇa carrying you away out of lust cannot be wiped out by my victory».

10. Sītā weeps bitterly at these unexpected sharp words. Like the fire blazing forth by pouring of abundant ghee, Rāma becomes more angry and tells her in the very presence of demons and monkeys – «I

killed Rāvaṇa only to fulfil my pledge, and not for your sake. You, with a blot in your character, are not ashamed to stand before me. I allow you to go anywhere you want. Hailing from a noble family how can I accept you who are defiled by the wicked Rāvaṇa? You can go as desired by you and stay with Lakṣmaṇa, Bharata, Sugrīva or Vibhīṣaṇa».

11. Unable to put up with Rāma's harsh words that struck her like sharp arrows, Sītā says – «Why do you talk to me like an ordinary man to an ordinary woman? If I was touched by Rāvaṇa, that was due to fate and I could not control it. My mind that is under my control is always with you. You could have sent this message of your mistrust in me through Hanumān when he came to Laṅkā; I would have then given up my life at that time. In that case you need not have also taken the trouble of putting up a fight with the demons, nor seek the help of friends like Sugrīva and Vibhīṣaṇa. Being under the control of anger, you, like a lowly person have not given any consideration to my feelings as a woman nor to my lineage».

Thus giving full vent to her feelings Sītā asks Lakṣmaṇa to prepare a pyre so that she can enter the fire as the only remedy before her at that time. She then enters the fire, after pledging her sincere love for Rāma in action, mind and words to the people around and the guardians of the quarters.

12. At this unexpected event all the gods headed by Brahmā and Śiva, and Rāma's father and ancestors appear on the scene. They proclaim that Rāma is Viṣṇu incarnate and Sītā is no other than goddess Lakṣmī. Fire god arises from the fire with Sītā on his lap, hands her over to Rāma, saying – «She is pure and not sinned; take her back as your wife».

In the above account of Vālmīki, Rāma's conduct is not blameless and this has necessitated Sītā's defence of herself, in the course of which she has to indirectly point out to his ambiguous behaviour.

Śaktibhadra cleverly avoids such unwanted situations, by using the motif of Anasūyā's boom to Sītā that any simple thing worn on her body will appear as a thing of beauty when Rāma looks at it.

Also the repudiation of Sītā by Rāma does not come as sudden as in VRā. Śaktibhadra does his best to prepare the audience slowly for this sorrowful event. At the beginning of act VII Rāma refers to his killing of Rāvaṇa and to some anxiety as to what people would say about

Sītā because of her long stay in Rāvaṇa's household (verse 11). Lakṣmaṇa confirms his brother's idea and says that Sītā should undergo some ordeal to prove her chastity (verse 12). All this makes the case of Sītā as not something personal but a matter of public significance.

When Sītā comes to Rāma, she says to herself, as if with a premonition, that she cannot anticipate how Rāma is going to receive her and what the people in general would speak of her (verses 15/16).

kim nu khalu mām mahājano mantrayate, kim nu khalu mām āryaputro manyate /

As in the original VRā., Sītā is first brought in a palanquin, an advance party clearing the way for her. Rāma resents to this highly dignified treatment to Sītā. Then Sugrīva and Lakṣmaṇa bring her on foot. Preparing himself to welcome Sītā heartily he goes to her and sees. Immediately he turns his face away from her, as she appears to him well dressed and decorated. He asks Sugrīva if he had seen a woman in separation appearing with sandalwood paste on her body, flowers in her hair, and wearing beautiful garments (verse 16). Sītā, in reality, unlike in the VRā., stands before Rāma in very simple attire; she knows that due to Anasūyā's boon to her, she appears to Rāma as beautifully dressed. When she tries to explain this fact no one is willing to listen to her. It is then that Rāma speaks harshly to her and asks her to leave his presence immediately since «she had deceived him even while they resided in the Daṇḍaka forest» (verse 17).

Not expecting such a cold treatment Sītā desires to enter the fire immediately. As suggested by Rāma, Lakṣmaṇa takes her out. Lakṣmaṇa returns soon with great excitement. He narrates to Rāma how Sītā declared before fire god that she was first touched by Rāvaṇa's arm at the time of her abduction, and then her feet touched the Aśoka garden. Then she entered fire unhesitatingly as if it were water. After a short while the fire god came out in a dazzling form placing Sītā in front (verses 18/19-20).

Nārada, a new character created by Śaktibhadra, enters from the divine world, greets Rāma on his victory over Rāvaṇa, and announces that Indra and other gods, Vasus, Aśvins and Rāma's ancestors from Manu to Daśaratha, are arriving to vouchsafe the purity of Sītā, and to bless them both. Although convinced by the appearance of the divine persons and his own ancestors Rāma frankly tells Nārada that his own

mistrust in the chastity of Sītā arose on account of her splendid appearance at the time of his meeting her now at Laṅkā. It is only then that Nārada tells of the boon of Anasūyā to Sītā.

Thus according to Śaktibhadra Sītā did not tell Rāma at the hermitage of Atri of this boon. This point is noted in ĀCū. as a sufficient cause for the suspicions in the mind of Rāma about Sītā's infidelity to him. The use of the motif of the boon is dramatically effective, presents Rāma and Sītā in a better light and describes the ordeal of fire fittingly as the most miraculous culminating event.

These are the two major innovations created by the poet. Besides, there are other minor ones, some of which are:

a. The location of Mārīca's hermitage in ĀCū. is near Janasthāna; in VRā. it is far away on the shores of the sea.

b. In ĀCū. Rāma first sees the golden deer; in VRā. it is Sītā.

c. In ĀCū. Sītā tells Lakṣmaṇa that she has heard about the fierce Rāvaṇa with twenty arms; this does not figure in VRā.

Śaktibhadra as seen above in a few instances, does not deviate drastically from the VRā. Moving very carefully within the framework of the *Rāmāyaṇa* epic he has chosen to re-narrate its main story, from Rāma's arrival to the forest to his victory over Rāvaṇa and return to Ayodhyā. The main intention of the dramatist is only to pack a series of plausible wonder-elements in the entire play with gripping interest, and this centres round the crest jewel and ring with magical powers. The fraudulent tricks of Rākṣasas are necessarily to be described at some length in order to provide the opportunities for the dramatist to reveal the powers of the jewels. Hence it is that Śaktibhadra deals with in the first four acts that cover more than half of the play, the atrocious activities of the demons in the Daṇḍaka forest under the instigation of Rāvaṇa and his allies.

Acts five to seven of the play quickly pass through the three *kāṇḍas* of the VRā., – *Kiṣkindhā*, *Sundara* and *Yuddha*. In summarising many crucial events that took place in Laṅkā in the last three acts, Śaktibhadra has exercised great caution and sensibility in the slight changes made or in the narration of some events in a slightly different order – all these made effectively in order to heighten the facets of marvel, even on occasions where the wondrous jewels play a secondary role.

A careful reading of ĀCū. shows that, besides the appropriate changes made as above, the other portions of the play recount the incidents almost as in the VRā. – like for example, – Lakṣmaṇa erecting the cottage for Rāma and Sītā, the description of the forest-region, the meeting of Rāvaṇa and Sītā in the Aśoka grove, Hanumān's reaction after seeing Laṅkā and his meeting Sītā.

As a keen student and admirer of Vālmīki, Śaktibhadra has used in many contexts the same expression, figures of speech etc. of VRā. Some random examples of these are:

1. ĀCū. V. 9/10 – Rāvaṇa's minister describing Rāma as an invincible bowman – *ajayyam dhanurdharāṇām āhur dāśarathim*; Cf. VRā. *Āraṇya* (Vani Vilas ed., 31.15), – Akampana's description of Rāma to Rāvaṇa after the killing of Khara – *rāmo nāma mahātejāḥ śreṣṭhas sarvadhanuṣmatām*.

2. The power and swiftness of Rāma's arrow – ĀCū. VI.I – *rājño rāmasya devyai prahita iva śaraḥ dhārayannaṅgulīyam*.

(Here Hanumān says – «I come to Laṅkā with the ring in my hand, like the arrow accurately and swiftly discharged by Rāma»).

Cf. VRā. *Sundara* (Vani Vilas ed., 1.43-44):

*Yathā rāghavanirmuktaḥ
śaraś śvasanavikramaḥ
gacched tadvad gamiṣyāmi
Laṅkāṃ rāvaṇa-pālitām*

(«I will go to Laṅkā swiftly like wind, and similar to the arrow of Rāma»).

3. Jaṭāyu introducing himself as a friend of Daśaratha – ĀCū. IV. 8, in a tense situation when Sītā cries out for help when the real nature of Rāvaṇa and his charioteer are revealed.

śaraṇam asmi jaṭāyur aham, sakhā Daśarathasya.

In VRā. *Āraṇya*, Vani Vilas ed., 14.3-4; Gorresio, 20.2-3, Rāma, while going to Pañcavaṭī, meets Jaṭāyu, who announces himself to Rāma as Daśaratha's friend; Rāma worships him.

*uvāca vatsa mām viddhi vayasyam pitur ātamanah /
sa tam piṭṛsakham matvā pūjayāmāsa Rāghavaḥ //*

4. In ĀCū. VII. 14 – Before Lakṣmaṇa brings Sītā to Rāma after Rāvaṇa's death at Laṅkā, Rāma is all praise for her; in this connection he says – «let every one see Sītā (*Jānakyā rūpam*) adorned with cha-

stity (*Cāritra-bhūṣaṇam*), who had refused Rāvaṇa (*avadhūya daśa-grīvam*) and had her mind solely set on me (*mām anuvrata-cetasah*)».

The term *anuvrata* (entirely devoted) used here is significant and occurs in a musical refrain «*aham rāmam anuvratā*» in four verses in Sītā's own angry reply to Rāvaṇa (*Āraṇya*, Vani Vilas ed., 47. 33-36). In this context Rāvaṇa tells Sītā about all types of his material riches at his disposal at Laṅkā and says that she will enjoy all of them as his mistress hereafter. In a sharp reply Sītā spurns Rāvaṇa and praises Rāma and his virtues, and that she is devoted only to him sincerely⁹.

5. ĀCū. VI. 5/6 – While Sītā laments her separation from Rāma at Laṅkā, she indicts the moon and says – «on one side you see me at Laṅkā and on the other, my lord at the forest. Telling me nothing you move on indifferently» (*Ekataḥ mām paśyasi, ekata āryaputram api na kiñcid bhaṇitvā udāsīna iva gacchasi*).

This echoes¹⁰ Vālmiki's version (VI. 5.6) when Rāma shares his grief with Lakṣmaṇa due to separation from Sītā.

A more detailed correspondence between ĀCū. of VRā. would surely be a useful exercise and bring out the influence of Vālmiki on the drama. Suffice it to point out here that Śaktibhadra, like any other poet who worked on the *Rāmāyaṇa* theme, was no doubt inspired fully by Vālmiki. At the same time he also wanted to compose a unique *nāṭaka* on the theme with dominant *adbhuta rasa*. The writers of dramaturgical treatises like Bharata and Dhanañjaya prescribed that the theme of a *nāṭaka* type of Sanskrit drama should be well known (*prakhyāta*). In order to avoid staleness of the theme the dramaturgists allowed the dramatists to use their originality a little (*kiñcid utpādyavastu ca*) and introduce the necessary innovations, so as to create a *nāṭaka* of interest to the audience and also providing the necessary satisfaction to the poet himself. So Śaktibhadra was certainly right in introducing some changes to make the ĀCū. a unique drama.

It is also noteworthy in this connection that the story of Rāma had attracted many poets and dramatists. On an analysis of many Rāma plays, available in print, manuscripts and known through refe-

9. For more of these innovations, see pp. 10-15, *The Wondrous Crest-Jewel in Performance*, ed. C.R. JONES.

10. V. RAGHAVAN, *The Wondrous Crest-Jewel in Performance*, Delhi, 1984, p. 21.

rences, Dr. Raghavan¹¹ has shown that poets used their originality mainly for the following purposes.

1. To save some characters from their negative conduct on specific occasions like Daśaratha and Kaikeyī on the occasion of the planned coronation of Rāma; and Rāma killing Vāli from behind the trees.

2. Full exploitation of the idea of magic, false impersonation etc.

In their enthusiasm, some of the poets made some extremely bold and large-scale variations like Rāvaṇa working witchery and black magic against Rāma. Such innovations were naturally not allowed by *alaṅkāra* writers like Ānandavardhana who uttered a note of warning to such exaggerated fancies in a classic like the *Rāmāyaṇa*. According to Ānandavardhana in such works as the *Rāmāyaṇa* which are already well known for their sentiments (*santi siddharasaprakhyā ye ca Rāmāyaṇādayaḥ*), poets should not introduce variations according to their sweet will (*kathāśrayā na tair yojyā, svecchā rasavirodhinī*) which may run counter to the original sentiments of their works. In this connection Ānandavardhana cites the *Rāmābhyaṇya* of Yaśovarman as a noteworthy illustration of a play which can be written without making such drastic changes (*kathāmārge na ca atikramaḥ*).

Seen in this light it should be said to the credit of Śaktibhadra that his innovations have been made as shown above, with good taste, and within the appropriate limits, as stipulated by Ānandavardhana. The analysis of ĀCū. in the light of VRā. has shown that the name given to him, that he is a dramatist of happy (*bhadra*), inventive genius (*śakti*) is truly significant.

11. *Some Old Lost Rāma Plays*, Annamalai University, 1961, pp. x-xiii.