



PERFORMING POWER: THE PERFORMANCE–POLITICS NEXUS IN THE SELECT PLAYS OF BHĀSA

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ABSTRACT

In Performance Studies, the definition of performance has been extended beyond theatrical performance to encompass bodily actions, social interactions, identity, and politics. This paper explores the relationship between performance and politics in three of Bhāsa's plays: *Pratijñā-Yaugandharāyaṇam* (The Minister's Vows), *Svapnavāsavadattam* (The Vision of Vasavadatta), and *Dūtavākyaṃ* (The Embassy). The study posits that the production of political power in Bhāsa's plays lies in performative practices. Drawing on concepts from Richard Schechner's Performance Studies, Erving Goffman's notion of performed identity, and Kayla Rush & Sonja Kleij's performance–politics relationship, the paper explores aspects such as disguise, hidden identity, diplomacy, and spectacle as political performances. In *Pratijñā-Yaugandharāyaṇam*, Yaugandharāyaṇa's disguises enable him to engage in political action by controlling his visibility and identity. In *Svapnavāsavadattam*, Vāsavadattā's political alliance depends on her death spectacle and hidden identity, which also involves self-denial. In *Dūtavākyaṃ*, Kṛṣṇa's diplomatic performance transforms into a spectacular embodiment.

KEYWORDS: Bhāsa, Performance Studies, performance-politics nexus, political performance, Sanskrit drama, power, disguise, identity, diplomacy, Kṛṣṇa

INTRODUCTION

Performance Studies has broadened performance from a stage-based activity to a form of embodied action through which identity, relationships, and power are negotiated. Schechner's emphasis on “embodiment, action, behaviour, and agency” (25) allows literature and theatre to be understood as enactments of social and political relations.

This approach is particularly useful for selected plays by Bhāsa, where politics is not merely represented but performed. This study focuses on *Pratijñā-Yaugandharāyaṇam* (The Minister's Vows), *Svapnavāsavadattam* (The Vision of Vasavadatta), and *Dūtavākyaṃ* (The Embassy). While the first two explore Udayana's political world and the alliances between Vatsa, Ujjain, and Magadha, the third centres on Kṛṣṇa's embassy to Duryodhana. Yaugandharāyaṇa employs disguise, Vāsavadattā performs her own death, and Kṛṣṇa uses diplomacy and spectacle to negotiate political power.

The study, therefore, asks how political power is performed through identity, disguise, speech, embodiment, and spectacle. Rush and Kleij's performance–politics nexus, particularly their double-helix model (8), provides the theoretical framework. The article argues that the three plays present interconnected forms of political performance: disguise and visibility in *Pratijñā-Yaugandharāyaṇam*, performed identity and political alliance in *Svapnavāsavadattam*, and spectacle and authority in *Dūtavākyaṃ*.

Performance, Politics and Power

The theoretical framework of this study draws on the broader conception of performance in Performance Studies. Schechner moves beyond theatre to encompass theatrical, ritual, social, and political behaviour, thereby understanding

performance as embodied action that produces meaning and effects.

This perspective is particularly relevant to politics, where authority depends not only on formal roles but also on recognisable behaviour, symbols, speech, and bodily presence. Political performance also depends on the audience. Yaugandharāyaṇa's disguise succeeds because others fail to recognise him; Vāsavadattā's assumed identity works because it is accepted; and Kṛṣṇa's diplomatic performance gains significance through its confrontation with Duryodhana and his court. Political performance, therefore, depends upon perception and recognition.

Goffman's concept of social interaction further explains how identity is constructed through behaviour and the impressions it produces in others. In Bhāsa's plays, the difference between actual and perceived identity has direct political consequences. Rush and Kleij's performance–politics nexus develops this relationship by arguing that power is performed through signs, gestures, speech, and presence. Their double-helix model shows that performance and politics remain interconnected even when one becomes more prominent than the other (8–10).

Language and the body are equally important to this relationship. Yaugandharāyaṇa's oath creates political obligation, Kṛṣṇa's speech seeks to reshape political relations, and Duryodhana's commands assert authority. Similarly, costume, ritual, posture, and bodily presence construct political identities. Duryodhana's seated posture performs sovereignty, while Kṛṣṇa's universal form disrupts it.

Thus, political performance is an embodied and relational practice through which identities and power are constructed, concealed, challenged, and transformed.



Pratijñā-Yaugandharāyaṇam: Disguise as Political Performance

Pratijñā-Yaugandharāyaṇam, or The Minister's Vows, as translated by Woolner and Sarup, is the best case of disguise as a political act. Here, the political tension emanates from the captivity of King Udayana of Vatsa by the king of Ujjain. What the political situation demands is an individual capable of manoeuvring around the enemy, and Yaugandharāyaṇa fits the role. His power is not of kingship but rather of political acumen. His political commitment manifests itself through a vow: "If I do not liberate the king, seized by the enemy's force, like the moon by Rahu, my name is not Yaugandharayana" (11).

It goes beyond merely expressing loyalty; rather, it performs politics through language. Yaugandharāyaṇa makes himself politically identifiable by naming himself in relation to his king's liberation. His identity is therefore indistinguishable from fulfilling his vow. In doing so, the vow becomes performative in nature, as it sets up a duty that has to be fulfilled.

In order to fulfil his vow, Yaugandharāyaṇa undergoes an identity transformation, assuming the guise of madness. Other political allies adopt different identities. This is important as Yaugandharāyaṇa still remains who he is – only his real identity becomes invisible once he adopts the new identity.

This is shown when Yaugandharāyaṇa comes across clothes left behind by a holy man: "This madman's guise, donned by the holy man, will cover me and liberate the king" (17). The term cover carries both its literal and political meanings. The costume allows him to blend in where he cannot afford his identity to be known; thus, covering his presence becomes politically expedient. This, therefore, makes it a tool of politics. Being theatrical is now a precondition of political behaviour.

The clearest expression of the matter emerges from Yaugandharāyaṇa's reflection about the impact of his disguise: "Concealed in the guise of a madman running about in the streets my form is familiar, but now they will see my work" (32).

The contrast between "form" and "work" is crucial to the analysis of political performance in the play. The former refers to what is seen by others. The latter is the political process concealed behind the former. In other words, political performance does not exclude political agency but rather facilitates it. It is because of his political insignificance in terms of form that Yaugandharāyaṇa turns out to be politically powerful.

It means that the connection between visibility and power is inverted here. In general, formal political authority manifests itself through symbols such as crowns, courts, armies, and ceremonial behaviour. However, Yaugandharāyaṇa lacks any of these indicators of authority while being disguised. Nevertheless, the absence of an indicator of formal political power allows Yaugandharāyaṇa to exercise strategic power.

The artificial elephant that helps seize Udayana follows the same logic from a different perspective. This object is made to look like a real elephant, and its appearance deceives Udayana. It leads to real political consequences – he is captured. Thus, one may conclude that an artificial appearance can have a real political effect when it is misinterpreted as reality.

The disguise used by Yaugandharāyaṇa functions the other way around. In place of a fabricated object fooling a political entity, a political entity consciously creates a fabricated identity for itself. In either case, politics requires the manipulation of perception.

Thus, the play portrays a political sphere where identification becomes a source of power. By recognising someone correctly, one knows something about their politics, and failing to do so means becoming open to their acts. Yaugandharāyaṇa uses this power. His political plan works since his enemies interpret him through the fabricated identity he creates.

However, the theatrical audience is positioned differently. The spectators realise that the apparent lunatic is the minister. This makes the performance one of dramatic irony, where the audience sees a political performance that is unseen by the audience within the dramatic performance. Therefore, the performance works at two levels. It deceives the internal audience and informs the theatrical audience.

It is an important point to note because it makes clear the fact that political performance necessarily involves issues of spectatorship. What is perceived in an action may differ among spectators. People of Ujjain see a madman, but the spectators see a political strategist. The political efficacy of disguise lies in the misrecognition by the internal audience, but the dramatic efficacy lies in recognition by the theatrical audience.

The performance shows how performance can become a tool of agency even in the midst of political restraints. Yaugandharāyaṇa cannot directly confront the powers of Ujjain. So he tries to change the conditions under which he is seen.

Disguise, therefore, is more than just deceit. It is a means of restructuring the connection between identity and politics. While the minister's true identity remains hidden, his political agency becomes even more potent. His apparently apolitical actions mask his highly political motivations.

The title of the play becomes significant in this context. The minister's vow is not fulfilled by military struggle but by a series of performances. His political utterance sets up the vow; his disguise provides him with access; his manipulation of perception gives him opportunity for action; and finally, his performance contributes to the liberation of the king.

Pratijñā-Yaugandharāyaṇam thus provides an insight into the first of the two dimensions of the performance–politics nexus – Performance as politics. This performance manipulates three key aspects of politics – identity, visibility, and recognition.

Svapnavāsavadattam: Performed Identity and Political Alliance

While in Pratijñā-Yaugandharāyaṇam performance is used mainly as a tactic of disguise, in Svapnavāsavadattam the interplay of performance and politics goes much further and includes the construction and disguise of identity. The political crisis depicted in the drama stems from Vatsa's weak status. The alliance with Magadha is considered necessary by the ministers of Vatsa, and the marriage of Udayana and Padmavati is proposed as a means of establishing it. The problem is Udayana's unwillingness to separate from Vāsavadattā.

The way out of this situation is found in political performance. The royal pavilion of Lāvaṇaka is burnt down,



and the rumour is spread about the death of Vāsavadattā and Yaugandharāyaṇa. In fact, they leave for Magadha disguised as pilgrims.

The political significance of the performance is made clear in the narrative prelude, where Vāsavadattā's death removes the sole obstacle to the marriage of Udayana and Padmāvatī, thereby making the political marriage between Udayana and Magadha possible. It is not true that Vāsavadattā died, but her political death makes her death politically meaningful.

It is very important that there should be a difference between being physically present and being politically present. While Vāsavadattā is alive, she cannot remain politically present as Vāsavadattā.

The process of constructing her new political identity becomes clear when Yaugandharāyaṇa presents her to Padmāvatī: "This is my sister. Her husband has gone abroad. My wish is that her Highness would take my sister under her protection for some time" (43).

The statement does more than conceal Vāsavadattā's identity. It constructs a new social relationship. Yaugandharāyaṇa performs the role of brother, while Vāsavadattā becomes his supposed sister. Padmāvatī accepts the performance and responds: "Now you belong to me" (43). This example shows us how identity can actually create political connections. While Vāsavadattā is not Yaugandharāyaṇa's sister, this performance creates a real bond of protection among them and between her and Padmāvatī. This fictional identity proves socially productive because it is accepted by its audience.

In this way, the performance becomes collective in its implementation. Yaugandharāyaṇa creates the identity; Vāsavadattā should present it; Padmāvatī should recognise it; and other people around should maintain it. Thus, political performance needs an interactional network rather than individual activity.

The psychological impact of the political performance becomes particularly strong when Vāsavadattā has to take part in Udayana's second wedding. It is she who has to make the marriage garland for her husband. Being forced to act according to her identity of Avantikā, while remaining Vāsavadattā in reality, she says to her maid: "His wife is dead, so it wouldn't be any use" (50).

The paradox is contained within this sentence. On one hand, Vāsavadattā is declared dead publicly while she is living privately. As such, she has to talk about herself as though she were someone else. The performance is so real that the character has to live in the reality of her own death.

Following immediately after this, she exposes the emotional price of performing: "She is gone. Alas! All is over. / My noble lord is now another's. Heaven help me!" (50).

This political connection involves self-negation on an individual level. The agency of Vāsavadattā consists of her concealing her own individuality in favour of the political order. This is a very interesting variant of the political performance as embodied in Yaugandharāyaṇa, where the minister uses the disguise to increase his political freedom of movement; Vāsavadattā uses it to prevent herself from revealing who she really is.

It means that the ethical dimension enters the connection between the political performance and politics in this play. The

political system is stabilised, but it costs the characters a lot in terms of emotion. The political success of this performance lies precisely in Vāsavadattā's preference for her political identity over her personal one.

The difference between the characters' knowledge and the audience's makes the political performance even more dramatic. The audience knows that Vāsavadattā is not dead, whereas Udayana and the political system believe she is.

This aspect of the structure appears more prominently when Vāsavadattā meets with Udayana as he sleeps. She thinks she is meeting Padmāvatī, but then she realises she has met her husband. She talks with him in her sleep, but when he wakes up, he does not know whether what happened to him was real or just a dream, and he accepts it as a possible illusion. Thus, the presence of the actual Vāsavadattā becomes an illusion as her socially identified personality is missing.

The scene makes it clear that performance changes not only others' vision but also their perception of reality. Vāsavadattā is present but politically invisible. Her presence becomes less real than the story of her death being performed.

Ultimately, the reversal happens through the portrait in the play. Portrait of Vāsavadattā is presented to Udayana. Padmāvatī notices the likeness between the painting and the woman she saw. Another kind of performance is the portrait. Previously, the inability to use the body for presence prevents the establishment of Vāsavadattā's identity, but afterwards, representation manages to unveil her identity. Thus, representation becomes the means by which the hidden identity is revealed.

The importance of the portrait is also accentuated by the political context in which it occurs. The previous political performance was based on a certain narrative accepted in public about the death of Vāsavadattā. The portrait questions the narrative because it provides the representation that allows recognizing her identity. Representation works both for concealing and for unveiling.

Consequently, there are transitions in the play from presence to absence, from identity to disguise, from reality to representation. These transitions are not just artistic but political, since the narrative's political reality depends on them. The existence of the Vatsa kingdom is ensured by the political disappearance of Vāsavadattā, the alliance with Magadha, her performed identity, and the restoration of the initial political order through the eventual revelation of her identity.

Performance thus becomes a way of temporarily restructuring political reality. Svapnavāsavadattam thus marks the emergence of the second element of the performance-politics relationship: the political system may rest on the performance, concealment, and subsequent unveiling of an identity. The case of Vāsavadattā shows how political action may be achieved through the manipulation of absence and how performance may have political repercussions.

Dūtavākyaṃ: Diplomatic Performance and Political Authority

Dūtavākyaṃ, titled *The Embassy* by Woolner and Sarup, reveals a variation in the way the performance-politics relationship is formed. In this case, political performance is not achieved mainly through disguise. It occurs through diplomacy, rhetoric, the performers' physical appearance, ceremony, and



spectacle. The main political event involves Kṛṣṇa, who arrives as an envoy, and Duryodhana, who rejects the Pāṇḍavas' claims.

Kṛṣṇa starts off as a diplomat whose goal is to avoid war and find an amicable solution. He appeals to his audience based on kinship: "Show affection to thy cousins; forget their faults. An alliance made with kin is good for both the worlds" (10).

This statement constitutes a performance of conciliation. Kṛṣṇa is trying to convert a political dispute into a familial collaboration. The diplomacy here, then, is not one of passivity; it is aimed at changing the political scenario.

Duryodhana, on the other hand, rejects the conciliatory performance. He holds that only those who are able to conquer their foes can become rulers and does not acknowledge the rightful claims of the Pāṇḍavas. As a result, Kṛṣṇa adapts his rhetoric: "Propitiated for peace he bates nothing of his haughty nature. Well, I must probe him with harsh and bitter words" (10).

This is significant because it highlights the performative aspect of Kṛṣṇa's strategy. The king assesses his audience and alters his actions accordingly. It is thus a diplomatic action that adapts itself depending on the political situation, using different tones and language.

Kingship of Duryodhana himself is performative. As the play begins, he is introduced through performative symbols of sovereignty. His physical body is shown under the royal parasol. His body has been adorned with different performative symbols of kingship. Later, when the political status of Kṛṣṇa is challenged, Duryodhana says: "Over me is borne the royal white umbrella, my head is sprinkled with holy water from the hands of the highest priests" (12).

In this way, the quotation shows us how Duryodhana grasps the nature of political authority by its ritual symbols. The umbrella and the coronation not only signal that he is a king, but are part of the ritual act that makes him one.

The political struggle is thus one between different acts of authority. Duryodhana displays sovereignty through royal ritual and his status. Kṛṣṇa displays diplomatic authority through speaking and confrontation. This makes the situation into a fight about which act of authority will shape the political context.

This becomes physical when Duryodhana tries to assert his authority in the court setting. His authority is partly founded on control over the ritual space. However, the presence of Kṛṣṇa undermines this control. The court is thus turned from a mere setting into a performance space where political hierarchy is performed through seating, movement, speech and gestures.

The visual manifestation of Draupadī's humiliation adds another layer of complexity to this connection between politics and performance. Duryodhana uses this painted image as an instrument for evading his political duty of rising to greet Kṛṣṇa when he comes. Therefore, this painting is an integral part of Duryodhana's performance of sovereignty, while Kṛṣṇa interprets it as a political and ethical mistake: "Who in the world is so lost to the sense of decency as to expose his own crime in an assembly?" (8).

The image acquires political significance by capturing an instance of violence committed in the courtroom. Through the painting, the past is performed in front of the present audience. While Duryodhana tries to capture the meaning of the image, Kṛṣṇa reveals the political significance of it.

The example clearly shows that political performances are not limited only to the human body. Objects can become political representations as well. Through the painted scroll, the moment of humiliation of Draupadī is captured and made visible in the political sphere that tries to repress the significance of it.

Duryodhana makes his move to turn the political debate into physical domination. He says: "Bind him, Duhsasana" (12).

The command represents an attempt to establish political superiority through physical control. Kṛṣṇa's response transforms the encounter: "Very well; I shall test his strength. [Assumes his universal form.]" (12).

The stage direction is important. It is not only a question of Kṛṣṇa claiming more power; Kṛṣṇa acts it out. The diplomatic emissary is transformed into a spectacular event. His body serves as the medium of political power.

Duryodhana's reaction shows the destabilizing effects of the spectacle. He keeps trying to find Kṛṣṇa and ultimately says: "There are Kesavas all round the council-chamber. What shall I do?" (12).

The political space of the Kuru court becomes transformed in the performance by Duryodhana. His power lies in the capacity of organizing the political space around himself, but Kṛṣṇa's performance disorganizes that space. He appears multiple times as a political envoy, and therefore cannot be controlled or categorized by the court's political terms anymore.

This means that a significant transformation occurs in the relation between performance and politics. The political power is communicated through language and diplomatic conventions at the start of the encounter. In the end, it communicates through the spectacle itself. Kṛṣṇa's performance no longer seeks to convince Duryodhana by any form of argumentation. It is presented to him as a demonstration of power that is beyond the institutional boundaries of the court.

The introduction of Kṛṣṇa's divine instruments further transforms the political space. Discus, bow, sword, and conch enter the dramatic space, becoming visible manifestations of his power. Political envoy becomes divine sovereign presence. This spectacle becomes a political demonstration.

This significance becomes even more apparent when examined through the lens of Rush and Kleij's double-helix theory. At the beginning of the play, politics takes the front seat, and performance is used as the means for politics. However, the more intense the encounter gets, the more important performance becomes, until spectacle is the primary medium of politics. But politics is never forgotten. It is the very spectacle that addresses the political dispute of sovereignty, legitimacy and control.

Performance by Kṛṣṇa demonstrates that the political power of Duryodhana is limited. While Duryodhana does have institutional power, it is reliant on the court's acceptance. Kṛṣṇa's spectacle shows that the authority of the court is not absolute. Political hierarchy could be undermined by another authority entering the political realm and capturing the audience's attention.

Dūtavākya thus introduces the third dimension to the performance-politics connection – political authority could be produced and contested by diplomatic performance and spectacular body.



Performance, Politics and Power: A Comparative Reading

Each of the three plays is an instance of political theatre, but they can be united by the shared theme of identity, visibility and recognition. For example, in the *Pratijñā-Yaugandharāyaṇam*, the main character conceals his political identity to carry out his actions. In the *Svapnavāsavadattam*, the female protagonist hides her identity to facilitate a political alliance. In the *Dūtavākyam*, the opposite occurs: Kṛṣṇa increasingly reveals and emphasises his authority, which finally overpowers Duryodhana's political performance.

Thus, the contrast between concealment and revelation is extremely important. The political performance of Yaugandharāyaṇa requires invisibility as a political figure; the political performance of Vāsavadattā requires absence from recognition. But Kṛṣṇa's political performance requires extreme visibility. All three methods are based on the single idea: political power depends on perception management.

This relationship between visibility and power offers a useful angle for comparing the three plays. Yaugandharāyaṇa controls visibility by the act of disguise. Vāsavadattā controls her visibility by allowing the political world to assume she is dead. Duryodhana attempts to manipulate visibility and behaviour through courtly rituals, but is finally thwarted by Kṛṣṇa's spectacle.

The role of the audience is also crucial to all three plays. The audience is in a position to know who the disguised person actually is in *Pratijñā-Yaugandharāyaṇam*. Similarly, the audience is aware that the supposedly dead queen is alive in *Svapnavāsavadattam*. In *Dūtavākyam*, the audience witnesses a spectacle that changes the political dynamics between Kṛṣṇa and Duryodhana. Therefore, the act of dramatic spectatorship becomes political.

The three dramas also exemplify different kinds of political agency. Yaugandharāyaṇa exhibits strategic agency by manipulating identities. Vāsavadattā exerts agency through concealment and sacrifice. Kṛṣṇa exercises diplomatic and spectacular agency by controlling the form of the political encounter. Thus, the political agency displayed in these plays shows that political action is not confined to institutional power alone.

In fact, one of the main consequences of these three plays is that those with formal authority may not necessarily wield more strategic power. Yaugandharāyaṇa does not have formal authority of being a king, but it is he who makes the political moves in *The Minister's Vows*. Vāsavadattā is a queen, but for her political empowerment, she must remain unrecognised by the public. Duryodhana is a sovereign, but Kṛṣṇa's actions reveal the limits of his power to control the political space.

Therefore, the chosen plays clearly support the basic tenet of the performance-politics relation: political power is always relational and performative; it functions within individual and group relations, and it is effective only when it is recognised and responded to.

It thus becomes clear from the dramaturgy of Bhāsa that politics is not merely something that happens in the court, on the throne, or in the kingdom. It also happens through the body, costume, speech, image, gesture and role.

CONCLUSION

The politics of performance in Bhāsa's selected plays shows that political power is not merely represented but enacted through performance. *Pratijñā-Yaugandharāyaṇam*, *Svapnavāsavadattam*, and *Dūtavākyam* demonstrate this through disguise, performed identity and spectacle.

In *Pratijñā-Yaugandharāyaṇam*, Yaugandharāyaṇa's disguise enables him to fulfil his political responsibility while concealing his identity. In *Svapnavāsavadattam*, Vāsavadattā's assumed death and disguised identity facilitate Udayana's marriage to Padmavati and the Magadhan alliance, though at considerable personal cost. In *Dūtavākyam*, Kṛṣṇa's diplomatic speech develops into spectacular embodiment when he assumes his universal form, transforming diplomacy into a demonstration of authority.

Together, the plays show that performance is integral to political action: disguise controls recognition, performed identity reshapes relationships, diplomatic speech negotiates power, and spectacle can transform political authority. Schechner's emphasis on embodiment and action, along with Rush and Kleij's performance-politics nexus, therefore provides a productive framework for reading Bhāsa's characters as political performers. Bhāsa ultimately demonstrates that political power becomes effective through bodies, voices, identities and spectacles. His plays thus offer a significant classical example of the inseparable relationship between performance and politics.

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