
**Holding a Just and Lively Mirror up to Human Nature: Aesthetically
Didactic Ideals in Sri Ballala's *Bhojaprabandha***

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Abstract: King Bhoja is known as a title holder of wisdom, charity, justice, and philanthropy. Through the research article titled "Holding a Just and Lively Mirror up to Human Nature: Aesthetically Didactic Ideals in Sri Ballala's *Bhojaprabandha*," the author proposes to showcase how Ballala in his *Bhojaprabandha* attempted to elegantly deliberate upon the life and credentials of the magnanimous personality of King Bhoja and his interactions with the eminent poets of the then times and society at large while initiating a fine dialogue on the most viable societal issues like feminism, power structure, authority-subordinate relationship, creative power and the ultimate value conferred upon the dignity of an Individual through the medium of day to day incidents with wisdom - impregnated poetic utterances; thereby making this timeless classic *Bhojaprabandha* a perennial piece of edifying caliber intertwined with a comprehensive display of aesthetic sensibility.

Keywords: Prabandha, Aphorism, Ideal King, Power dynamics, Ideological, Hegemony

"Tis not enough to help the feeble up, But to support him after."

---William Shakespeare, *Timon of Athens*, Act 1, Scene 1

The splendid narrative based on the life and compassionate way of life of the great King of Malava with Dhara as his capital, namely King Bhoja, was composed by the poet Ballala, existed probably in the second half of the seventeenth century, was believed to be the inhabitant and son of Varanasi and Shri Trimalla respectively. A scholar of Astronomy and Astrology, the poet Ballala has had the vividness of putting forward an account of the great King with a fine blend of rational veracity and artistic ingenuity. Though this

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Prabandha cannot be deemed as a historically bonafide description of either the central character of the text or any other person referred to herein, this epoch-making text proves to be a noteworthy display of noble wisdom pertaining to ethical and social ideals in various incidents and *Niti shlokas*. Nothing attracts more in a person than the nobility of human character. King Bhoja, who proved by his personal demeanor that real happiness and grace could be possessed by adding and prospering the lives of others, has been represented as an upright king who, by virtue of his authoritatively generous personality and inborn merit, reigned munificently and worked painstakingly to uplift the life and esteem of public at large, thereby creating a striking sense of the ideal state. R. A. Scott James brilliantly asserts in his book "*The Making of Literature*,"

"The main distinction is that laid down by De Quincey between the "literature of knowledge" and the "literature of power," the function of the first being to teach, the function of the second to move:

All that is literature seeks to communicate power; all that is not literature is to communicate knowledge. And again:

In that great social organ, which, collectively, we call literature, there may be distinguished two separate offices that may blend and often do so, but capable, severally, of severe insulation and naturally fitted for reciprocal repulsion. There is, first, the literature of knowledge and, secondly, the literature of power. The function of the first is to teach; the function of the second is to move; the first is a rudder; the second is an oar or a sail. The first speaks to the mere discursive understanding; the second speaks ultimately, it may happen, to the higher understanding or reason, but always through affections of pleasure and sympathy."

(RA Scott James 12-13). As James delineates the differentiation between two kinds of literature as that of knowledge and power, Sri Ballala, in the example of King Bhoja's actions and manners, provides an incessant source of motivation for the posterity to deal with the problems of the everyday world with a vision to create an affirmative imprint on the hearts of others. Ananda Coomaraswamy aptly writes in the topic titled "What Has India Contributed to Human Welfare?" of his luminous book "*The Dance of Shiva*," "What is needed for the common civilization of the world is the recognition of common problems, and to co-operate in their solution. If it is asked what inner riches India brings to aid in the realization of a civilization of the world, then, from the Indian standpoint, the answer must be found in her religions and her philosophy, and her constant application of abstract theory to practical life". (Coomaraswamy 16)

Chapter one, titled "Bhoja's Accession to the Throne," delineates the narrative of how Bhoja, the son of an aged King Sidhula, survived due to the writ of fate. As regards Bhoja's life, the adage prominently referred to the Greek tragedies, i.e., "Destiny as Character," seems highly applicable. Taking a view of his physical frailty in old age, King Sidhula quite wittily handed over the kingdom to his brother Munja and entrusted him for the well-being of his son. The sporadic visit of a learned Brahmin, adept at the art of prophecy-making, changed the course of events. Having tested the credentials of the Brahmin's merit and at the behest of Buddhisagara, King Munja enquired about the horoscope of Prince Bhoja. The Brahmin prophesied thus,

“For full fifty years and five
Seven months and three days more will
King Bhoja ruled over the land,
The southern realm and Gauda, too”. (06)

After having listened to the forecast, the King grew pale and began brooding over the matter of future. His disposition got shattered by the thought of the prediction and he felt soon after,

“The one who doesn't destroy his foe
And diseases as they come up,
Though he be of mighty stature
Will get destroyed by them later. (14)

The above negative thought made him approach the ruler of Vanga region, namely, Vatsaraja whom he asked to put an end to the life of Bhoja in the Bhuvaneshwari forest. Vatsaraja tries to persuade Munja not to be so antagonistic and vindictive by commanding such orders as that may cause furore amongst the subject who takes Bhoja as their future ruler. He says,

“Even with the abundance of virtuous deeds,
An unrighteous act dispels the glory.
The flame of a lamp, well-filled with oil,
Gets extinguished by the blast of a storm. (26)

However, Munj gets upset after hearing such words from Vatsaraj and orders him to kill Bhoja. When Vatsaraja reveals the King's verdict to Bhoja, he comments,

“Musing over Rama’s exile and Bali’s confinement
Pandava's forest life, Vrsni's end, and the loss of the realm
Of king Nala, Ravana’s stay in prison and his death,
Know this! All things perish in time; no one can prevent it. (28)

Bhoja, using his own blood, writes a poignant letter asking Vatsraj to hand that over to the King and carry out the command of the King there and then. Such daring individuality of Bhoja impregnated with prudent expressions makes Vatsaraj feel remorseful, and he develops a sense of renunciation within himself and plans to save the righteous prince at any cost. Munj, too, finally realizes his fault and takes repentance. He, after having bestowed on the royal throne on Bhoja, left the kingdom with a view to undertaking meditations and religious practices. Ballala writes,

“Munja’s heart stood still like a mountain’s rock at that moment
Bhoja was alive, and it sank into an ocean of nectar.
And when, with his virtuous wives, he left for the penance groves,
Bhoja carried the royal load with enjoyments and gifts.” (P. 41)

Chapter two, entitled "Bhoja as the Patron of Scholars," narrates Bhoja’s way of consolidating his kingdom after deputing Buddhisagara as his prime minister. Once Bhoja, after being told by a Brahmin regarding his penny-pinching countenance and lack of bounty, and otherworldly lessons that the Brahmin had learned from his father on the way to Kashi, like,

“If your heart’s attuned to good policy
Do not, even in a dream, serve a king,
Who is overawed by his ministers
Or controlled by eunuchs or young women. (49)

He further tells the King, "A monarch who does not part with anything will never be magnanimous. Your Majesty! Those rulers of yore, like Karna, Dadhichi, Sibi, and Vikrama, became adornments to the celestial world and are alive even today because of

their noble and divine qualities sprung from benevolent acts. Do you think other rulers have an existence like that?" (P. 45)

This occurrence changed the ways of King Bhoja, and he started entertaining the group of scholarly circles in his palace, which earned him a great reputation. Once, when the prime minister of his suggested controlling his daily practice of extravagance, King Bhoja asserted,

"Of the whole wealth gathered by a person
What is not bestowed as gifts, what's not enjoyed,
Or given for the enjoyment of friends,
Will, in due course, become no wealth at all."(61).

With the passage of time the court of the King got decorated with the well versed and visionary poets like Vararuci, Bana, Mayura, Harisankar, Kalinga, Karpura, Tarendra, etc exceeding their number to approximately five hundred.

"The Arrival of Kalidasa" narrates the arrival of the greatest-ever poet, Kalidasa, adorned with princely charms and literary grandeur. By virtue of his witty and spontaneous diction and use of poetic eloquence, he created a place of his own in the royal court. He had the superb aptitude to appropriately divine what was going on in the minds and hearts of others. King Bhoja highly admired Kalidasa. Once, when the King came to know that Kalidasa had paid his visits to courtesans, he became detrimental towards him. When the King once thought that how Kalidasa, being so learned and reputed as well, could become infatuated towards amorous pleasures, Kalidasa spoke thus,

"Who indeed are we mortals to discuss
The wanton nature of the mind-born god,
Who reduced to one-half the great prowess
Of the fiery god who burned the cities." (87)

Kalidasa had received high approbation in the heart of the King because of his poetic utterances. We further come to know after the narration that even the weavers of Dhara Nagri were competent in poetic craft and could amusingly respond poetically. The poverty-stricken condition of Bana is also narrated passionately, which is followed by the

King's resolution to satisfy Bana's needs at the earliest,
"Of what avail that poetry that doesn't create
Eloquence, strength that can't be restored to his status
One fallen into a crisis, or wealth that fails
To lift solicitors to the donor's status." (104)

The same chapter encompasses the lofty dialogue between the two thieves, Sakunta and Marala, that deals with the philosophical aspect of life, happiness, and how the mere accomplishment of money is no guarantee of worldly contentment. When asked by Marala what Sakunta was going to do with the heap of gold and riches worth crores, he says so simply,

"I am going to bestow this wealth on a brahmana, well versed in all scriptures and subsidiary texts, so that he may not have to go begging anymore" (P.87). The said statement by Sankuka highlights the high sentiments conducive to a sympathetically sound society that takes dignity in humanistic actions. In this chapter, the author narrates the meeting of witty poets like Kridachandra and Ramesvara. Ramesvara's way of eulogizing the King is worthy of attention,

"O king Bhoja, abode of all virtues!
In the sky above, that is the forehead
Of thine own beloved known as renown,
The tilak of musk always shines glorious." (127)

The personal life of Kalidasa was decorated with his tendency towards attaining sensuous pleasure, and this was one of the reasons behind the King's distress. Though occasionally, King tried to cause some distance between himself and Kalidasa, it could never be brought into practice out of the bond of affinity. The jealous court poets then hatched a mala fide conspiracy to malign Kalidasa's image before the King. As the Romans conspired against Julius Caesar taking the assistance of Brutus, they also took the help of a female betel bearer, namely Tarangavati of the King, who, out of greed, agreed upon creating disillusionment in the mind of the King regarding Kalidasa's act of deceitfulness against the King by paying secret entrances to the inner residence meant for royal queens in the garb of a maidservant. Suspicion adds to one's lack of judgment. The King grew apprehensive of the relationship between his queen Liladevi and Kalidasa. He begins

questioning the frail nature of a woman's character,
"The gallop of a horse, the fall of a thunderclap
The working of a woman's mind, a man's fortunes
When drought prevails or the earth becomes flooded
The divines can't be divine; how can a human being be divine?" (143)

The King ordered Kalidasa, without having given him an occasion for clarifications, not to remain in kingdom under any circumstance. However, as the providence would have it, Liladevi's sharp and sophisticated wisdom vindicated Kalidasa's unmatched veracity to the King and the King finally felt highly penitent of his actions against his most bosom friend Kalidasa, for no fault of his.

Chapter five, titled "Kalidasa's Returns," narrates the agony of King Bhoja in the absence of Kalidasa and his reunion again. Meeting his close friend, Kalidasa, Bhoja said,
"Walking or standing, may it be,
While keeping awake or asleep,
Be it so my mind is never
Parted from you, O great Poet! (158)

Further in the narrative, there is a brilliant depiction of witty give-and-take and precious dialogues full of worldly wisdom. The court of the King has ever been adorned with poets ready to make their utterances rewarded by the King. See the *shloka* as a ready reference,

"Chariot of a single wheel, steeds controlled by serpent-like reins,
Traversing a propless path and charioteer to a cripple,
Still, the sun goes each day to the end of the endless sky,
Success for the great comes from the spirit, not equipment." (169)

The ultimate thing is that Bhoja selflessly kept roaming about the kingdom to feel the pulse of his subjects and help and reward them as per their needs and merits. Such a fair gesture has been considered a great kingly virtue.

Even the thieves of the kingdom were able to recite the most prolific verses. In chapter six, titled "Rewarding the Thief," while King had composed the three lines of a couplet out of great delight as such: "Attractive of youthful dames, most obliging friends,

Nice and loving kinsmen, humble, sweet-tongued servants

Herds of proud elephants moving, trotting horses,” then the fourth line was abruptly completed by the thief as follows, “When the eyes are closed, they vanish into nothing (200).

The miserable predicament of the utter poverty of the poet Magha has been brilliantly dealt with. After having been bestowed by the King a heavy amount of money for their sustenance, Magha's wife heard of the praise of her husband from the beggars, and she distributed it to them without taking heed to her own adversity. Grief stricken Magha, having failed to support the people waiting to be helped by him, breathed his last with the following words,

“Depart, depart, O life! Ere it happens
The suitors depart disappointed.
If life is to depart still, after that,
Is there a point in carrying on? (283)

The moral behind this account of Magha is that the colossal value system of charity and benevolence was followed not only by the kings but also by the intellectuals who were themselves lacking in wealth.

Suppose one intends to summarize critically the vision document of this superbly composed narrative based primarily on the life of the most sagacious Bhoja of Malwa, who, by virtue of his charity and wisdom, received noble acclaim amongst his contemporaries. The wisdom of the past has interestingly served as a benchmark for the higher authorities to handle the ethical and moral questions of society. T. S. Eliot, in his brilliant essay, “*Tradition and the Individual Talent*,” enunciates the significance of tradition in the evolution of the individual intellect as follows, “Tradition is a matter of much wider significance. It cannot be inherited, and if you want it, you must obtain it through great labor. It involves, in the first place, the historical sense, which we may call nearly indispensable to anyone who would continue to be a poet beyond his twenty-fifth year ... This historical sense, which is the sense of the timeless as well as of the temporal and of the timeless and of the temporal together, is what makes a writer traditional” (Eliot in Enright and Chickera 294). Sri Ballala, too, proposes a narrative that dwells upon the historical and cultural perspectives of the times of King Bhoja with its noble ideals. It is a genuine fact that no time is perfect, and no person is either. The Indian sensibility finds its

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superb representation throughout every detail. Bhoja's spirited acts, his guardianship to the poets of his times, and his humane temperament make him a king of higher signature and relevant even in our own times. The opinion asserted by F Max Muller is quite convincing in nature; he says in his book India --- What can it teach us? "India occupies a place second to no other country. Whatever sphere of the human mind you may select for your special study, whether it be language, religion, mythology, philosophy, whether it be laws or customs, primitive art or primitive science, everywhere, you have to go to India, whether you like it or not because some of the most valuable and most instructive materials in the history of man are treasured up in India, and in India only" (F Max Muller 9). This *prabandh* endeavors to provide the central attributes of an ideal king reigning supreme in the heads and hearts of his subjects, conducting himself in a manner that gives succor and tranquility to everyone who envisions attaining the four *Purushathas*. Science, fine art, poetry, liberal aesthetics, etc. --- all find ample representation in this text. This equally presents the significance of multiple opinions on a particular topic with exemplary and valuable connotations, offering an ardent need for public tolerance and respect for others' opinions. Various poetic compositions in the form of aphorisms in epigrammatic style and touching incidents mentioned in the text are the profound display of the thought process and societal interactions of the time with its natural piety, vindicating Sri Ballala's potentiality to be a post-modernist both in terms of content and style. His endeavor to charismatically bring to the fore an elegant discourse on gender roles, femininity, interpersonal affairs, psychological reflections, power dynamics, ideological hegemony, and philosophically poetic utterances offer sagaciously prolific insights to the virtuous readers of the Sanskrit literature in particular and the seeker after the excellence of the Indian Knowledge System in general.

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