SUMMARY OF THE THESIS

DECODING HIERARCHIES IN ANCIENT SANSKRIT DRAMA (A STUDY OF KALIDASA’S ABHIJANANASAKUNTALAM, BHASA’S SVAPANAVASAVADATTA AND SHUDRAKA’S MRICHHAKATIKAM)

This dissertation follows an argument that there have been many “hierarchies” in practice in the ancient Sanskrit dramas which need to be decoded. The misrepresentations, caste-discriminations and gender hierarchies scripted in the so called fifth Veda ‘drama’ continued unabated despite various turns in history. The three seminal texts—Abhijananasakuntalam, Mrichhakatikam and Svapanavasavadatta respectively have been read closely in terms of Brahmin-Kshatriya alliance, misogyny-patriarchy and marginalisation. The representations of high caste characters, women and the marginal characters involved in the making of narration have been put under scrutiny here. The widely appreciated Sanskrit drama, hitherto seen as the fifth Veda approved for the entertainment of every caste stands exposed when decoded from the perspectives of caste, class and gender. Its claim to undying fame can be seriously challenged as it seems to be extremely exclusive in the selection of people and events. The Brahminical social values dominated the political and social lives of people in those times. In order to understand history governed by superior authority, one ought to comprehend the ideology behind its representation. Obviously, the Brahmin ideologies and Kshatriya ideologies were more in alliance than contestation with each other. This alliance gave out the multiple identities and ideologies endorsing hierarchies based on caste, class and ethnicity. As the writers aka the ‘recorders of history’ were usually Brahmins and occasionally Kshatriyas, the documents of the past were the prerogatives of these ‘learned patriarchs’. The Brahmin playwrights have placed Brahmins on high pedestal everywhere in their plays as they have praised the Kshatriya kings for their valour and duties.
for their subject. King Dushyanta in *Abhijananasakuntalam* has been praised as a duty bound monarch and brave enough to have helped the king of Gods Indra in fighting demons. King Udayana is never at fault whether for losing his kingdom in passion for his beautiful wife Vasavadatta or for marrying Padmavati for wholly political reasons. The concepts of power, subjugation, love, romance, marriage and parenting have always strengthened the foundation of social life of human beings. Drama was the perfect genre for the ‘representation’ of such socio-cultural stratum of society in India. The power politics of history and tradition led to the ‘creation’ of various ‘truths’ about caste, class and gender. While tracing the journey of women in Drama, we realise that they enjoyed better social standing in earlier times than in the later period. The courtesan Vasantsena is better placed than the royal wives Vasavadatta, Padmavati and Sakuntala in the times of Bhasa and Kalidasa respectively. We realise that the play *Abhijananasakuntalam* is never actually about the ‘recognition’ of Sakuntala as she ‘recognises’ herself as a forsaken and repudiated woman in king’s court. Even when the monarch gets the ring, he is sad at having lost the son that is prophesized to be born to him. His longing is not for Sakuntala, but for his future “heir”. Vasavadatta in Bhasa undergoes a bitter trial for the sake of her husband’s restoration to his kingdom. The self-abnegation of Vasantsena even being a courtesan shows her dignified behaviour. Women had to strive to maintain their position in patriarchal system. The dominant “social cultures” that speak of the triumph of morality and justice have always excluded the marginal. While decoding the symbols, metaphors, tones, imagery, and even *rasa* (sentiment) in the plays under consideration, the constant conflict of ‘identity’ and the way one recognises himself/herself in society is evident. The marginal have been fighting the constant battle of ‘recognition’ in these classical texts. The critiquing and staging of these plays have also decoded many hierarchies. This thesis reconsiders the past culture and tradition in the light of modern perspectives like discourse, feminism and identity issues. We see the ideological state
apparatuses like the hermitages, courts and spring festivals shaping the life of common men. The writers had selected from the ancient past “what they needed” and made their own innovations according to the social and political pressures of the times. The writers of the respective plays have represented people and circumstances according to the societal values of those times. All three plays under consideration in this thesis follow and project hierarchies in terms of political power, chauvinism and misrepresentations of various classes and castes. These are undoubtedly the Brahminical texts, and they continue the genre of Brahminical literature starting from Vedas to *Manusmriti*, and beyond. This thesis is an attempt to unveil the hierarchical patterns in the name of religion and humanity which have been propagated by ancient Indian literature. The caste and class hegemonies claiming the spiritual-political status from the ancient times need to be checked. The strict moral codes of conduct which we mistakenly claim to be our “cultural heritage” must be delinked now from literature meant for entertainment. The Ancient Sanskrit plays should be studied for a rightful interpretation of the past but they should no longer be allowed to overpower the public reality in the participation of age-old myths and obsolete value systems.