



Institutionalizing Silence: A Study of Censorship, Power, and Violence in Surendra Verma's *Aathva Sarg*

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Abstract

The idea of power and influence, who wields it, and who can exercise it, is one that runs throughout the text, taking different forms and settling into different spaces of execution. Not only do different institutions assert power over the others, they also have to manage force relations within their own circle of hegemony while establishing their verdicts and interests as the common sense of the larger society while constantly silencing them and manufacturing their consent. This not only determines the idea of the pyramid of power but also actively defends it while those lower down the other are constantly negotiating with the power dynamics, struggling to not just thrive, but to even exist at an institutional level. This paper aims to study Surendra Verma's *Aathva Sarg* as a text deeply entrenched in the dynamics and the corridor of power, and how the ruling classes maintain the idea of hegemony by constantly silencing the masses into their own version of the greater good and common sense.

Keywords: Power, hegemony, consent, coercion, institutions

"See, people with power understand exactly one thing: violence."

-Noam Chomsky, *Understanding Power*

Introduction

The aforementioned quote by Noam Chomsky serves as a good starting point in the discourse surrounding power as it can be used to investigate different categories of violence and how they emanate out of the ideas of power, control, and knowledge. The threat of

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physical assault is often preceded by the specter of “linguistic” or “symbolic violence” wherein the oppressor has already established a stronghold where they never need to resort to physical attack in order to dominate or oppress a group or a people. For Pierre Bourdieu, language can function not only as a tool of mere communication, but a weapon designed and designated for “a capacity of verbal violence”, which, through linguistic exchanges, can also allude to “a capacity for physical violence” explicitly or in any tone of implication (*Language and Symbolic power* 103). These exchanges in turn govern how the relationship between two entities operates, who has the agency to speak, verbally or physically assault, how the idea of knowledge is used to subjugate, and how it becomes the power which censors and invisibilizes. To establish and highlight this point further, Michel Foucault notes that, “The exercise of power is not simply a relationship between partners, individual or collective; it is a way in which certain actions modify others” (“The Subject and Power” 13).

Keeping these arguments in mind, this paper aims to study Surendra Verma’s *Aathva Sarg* and examine the function of power, knowledge, violence, censorship, agency, hegemony, and related ideas through a close-reading of the text, and analyze their exercise and execution within the play. The play *Aathva Sarg* (Eight Canto), revolves around the poet Kalidasa’s epic poem ‘Kumarasambhavam’ (Birth of Kumar) and the poem’s recently concluded eight canto. The poem centers on the birth of Kartikeya, the son of Lord Shiva and Parvati, with the eight canto focusing on their married life and becoming the focal point of controversy for its alleged obscene description of the same. A renowned poet in the court of King Chandragupta, Kalidasa, upon completing the eight canto, decides to read the aforementioned canto in a meeting with other artists and courtiers where charges of indecency and vulgarity are levied upon the verse. Soon after, the defenders of religion and belief, informed by artists jealous of Kalidasa of the obscenity in his latest work, demand a public apology from Kalidasa for hurting religious sentiments and request the work not be made public lest it “lead the weak-willed masses astray” (“कच्चे मस्तिष्क पर इसका बुरा प्रभाव पड़ेगा”; my trans.; Verma 38). Refusing to get drawn into a conflict with the protectors of faith, King Chandragupta, who also happens

to be Kalidasa's father-in-law, requests Kalidasa to understand the gravity of the situation, the position of the complainant, and to either omit the names of Shiva and Parvati from the text, or to skip the descriptions of their intimate conjugal life altogether. Kalidasa, taking this as an affront to his artistic self and as censorship of his artistic expression, withdraws the work completely, refusing to make it public or sharing it with the masses anywhere in any way, shape, or form, eventually choosing to maintain silence on the topic of "Kumarasambhavam."

Michel Foucault believes that power, which is everywhere, functions on the most basic human levels of social relationships, which in turn inform all institutions, organizations, and all social communication. He further notes that power does not function in binaries or in a top-down structure, but instead, power is always circulating, always dynamic, and always being contested, especially in maintenance of everyday status quo, or what those who produce knowledge believe to be normal (*Discipline and Punish* 93). Thus, power not only constantly shapes and re-shapes what is knowledge, but who has the access to shape it, and who cannot reach it but must abide by it. The play itself is an amalgamation of complex social ties where what Foucault calls 'force relations' are constantly at play to gain an advantage, secure one's position, maintain the idea of influence and strength, or simply exist in the daily scheme of life. These force relations can be any act in one's social settings or communication and are always, once again, in flux, ever-changing, ever-moving, constantly redefining both the force and the relationships they represent. One of the first examples of this in the play is a rather inconspicuous comment by Dindnaga, another artist at Chandragupta's court, who remarks on the impurity of language and linguistic sense in the latest canto by Kalidasa, when the latter recites the verse in front of a select group (Verma 29). Before Kalidasa could answer, Dindnaga is rebuked by Saumitra, another artist whose rebuttal demands a wider space and license for artistic expression and language. Here, Dindnaga is not only trying to question the legitimacy of the foremost artist of his era, but also trying to establish his own critique at the same time, battling the force relations that have put Kalidasa on a social and artistic pedestal. This is proven when it is revealed that he is the one who

informs Dharma Guru, the religious leader of the kingdom, of the eight canto and its supposed obscenity and sacrilegious content, rolling the dice of a power-play which ends with the discontinuation of Kumarasambhavam. Dindnag is not only plying for the downfall of an artistic rival, but also garnering capital for himself at the same time.

This idea of capital, which differs from the concept of economic capital, falls under, what Pierre Bourdieu describes as, social capital. These distinct varieties of capital emerge out of Bourdieu's concept of 'fields', which are numerous social settings where humans communicate and express their different tendencies or outlook while challenging each other for the accumulation and disposal of various kinds of capital (*Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste* 94). The field or the setting of a field can range from social networking sites to a place of work or worship and consists of any relationship which is social, cultural, economic, intellectual, educational, etc., a grid of any social network or relation. Bourdieu contends that humans interact with and experience power differently depending on which field they are in, leading to the creation of different kinds of capital, namely economic, cultural, symbolic, and social (245). Social capital, which is accrued through networking, establishing social relationships, and skillfully operating connections (127), is produced and reproduced aiming to determine one's social status within a particular field. Dindnaga's tendencies, or rather dispositions as Bourdieu calls it, in the field of artistic expression is one of critiquing his rival Kalidasa for an ounce of social capital; an act which is solidified by his conversation with Dharma Guru, establishing his capital in the eyes of a religious leader, his followers, and fellow like-minded artists. Dharma Guru, who is described in the text as a man away from worldly affairs or the idea of political and economic gains, is a man of immense symbolic capital, something he is well aware of even with his ignorance of practical or materialistic matters. Symbolic capital, for Bourdieu is recognition based on one's fame, authority, honor, acts of service etc. and acts as a capital one can hold in a given field, and comes with a vast, even if initially latent, potential for political, cultural, and economic gains, based on one's relation to that field.

In a land where the ideas of God, religion, and worship play central roles in the cultural, social, and political existence of a people, a man like Dharma Guru becomes not only a representative of God on earth, but is elevated to a height of knowledge, power, and pomp that exceed that of even a king. His existence then takes a political turn where he can sway the decisions or the decree of a ruler, based on his own sacred knowledge and the supposed will of the people. If the foremost representative of Shiva in the land of Ujjaini, of Chandragupta, believes Kalidasa's canto to be offensive and vulgar, it must become the common sense of the people for he wills it so, even if the said people have no access to the document in question. Slavoj Žižek notes that, "Social-symbolic violence at its purest appears as its opposite, as the spontaneity of the milieu in which we dwell, of the air we breathe" (Žižek 35), asserting how symbolic language is so embedded in the language humans use that they end up becoming the common truth with their "imposition of a certain universe of meaning" (Žižek 11), while making sure that any other universe of meaning appears unreasonable or unfathomable. When Dharma Guru attends a ceremony to celebrate Kalidasa and his most recent work, followed by his recitation of the text, not only is he deeply offended and hurt by the content, he makes sure to publically deride anyone who stands with the author, proclaiming that, "The creator and consumers of this work are sinners. Anyone who participates in the celebration of such an unethical and unrighteous poet is a sinner. Anyone who stands for his cause is a sinner, anyone who aids him is a sinner" (इसका रचयिता पापी है. ऐसे अधर्मी और अनाचारी कवि के सम्मान में समारोह में जो भाग ले वह पापी है। जो उसका निमित्त बने वह पापी है, जो सहायता दे वह पापी है; my trans., Verma 37). Force relations exercised by Dindnaga have now been furthered and much exaggerated by Dharma Guru, who makes sure that in the wake of his proclamation no one attending the ceremony feels without guilt or blame, and soon follow him in his derision of Kalidasa and his work. This selective outrage of one man, based on his social and symbolic status, soon becomes the consciousness of the collective without even reaching the public which is supposed to be led astray by the work in question.

The play has a very clear conflict of power where at the bottom of the Foucauldian pyramid are the masses whose deed has already been decided for them, without them having a say in that matter. The

artist whose work has raised the question is above the masses for he had the space and the freedom to produce the kind of work he did; but that is the extent of his freedom. Those directly above him in the hierarchical pyramid ensure that his artistic freedom and the freedom of expression is curbed and monitored accordingly. As Foucault notes, "The power in the hierarchized surveillance of the disciplines is not possessed as a thing, or transferred as a property; it functions like a piece of machinery. And, although it is true that its pyramidal organization gives it a 'head', it is the apparatus as a whole that produces 'power' and distributes individuals in this permanent and continuous field" (*Discipline and Punish* 196). The field is permanent because there is no escaping the pyramid, and it is continuous for power is a constant struggle, as is apparent in the tussle between not only the protectors of faith and Kalidasa, but also the cold war between the institute of religion and the office of the king, the institute of monarchy. While the king represents the will of the people, Dharma Guru represents the faith of the people; and in a battle of faith and will, the former triumphs, for the king himself is a representative of god and must abide by the word of those who lay down the path of god for the society. Even under a monarchy, the king must stand aside for the institution of religion lest he lose the people he means to rule over, something Chandragupta does in the play after all efforts at diplomacy and politicking have failed. Not only do different institutions assert power over the others lower down the pyramid, they also have to manage force relations within their own dominant circles, while establishing their verdicts and interests as the common sense of the larger society and constantly silencing them and manufacturing their consent. This censorship only establishes the rule of the dominant classes and consolidates the hegemony of those in power.

When the representatives of the religious institute demand that Kalidasa be punished for producing a text that violates the sacred image of God (Verma 38), they are not only questioning the legitimacy of his representation, but also curbing the freedom and expression afforded to arts and literature to expand and enhance the popular imagination. This brings us to the question of institutionalized silencing and censorship within the play, and how it helps in maintaining the hegemony and status quo of the ruling

classes. Institutionalized silencing here does not refer to the physical detainment in order to suppress a voice or actions, but a subtler, more layered execution of censorship where the very notion of silence becomes common sense and the greater good of the society. The systems at work within the play, especially the institution of faith and religion, and that of the monarchy, work in tandem, even if the latter does so reluctantly, to ensure the suppression of dissenting voice or of voices that deviate from dictated paths, paths that have been laid down by those with access to knowledge and power. Oscar G. Brockett is of the opinion that, "In the arts, we often see it [censorship] as concerned merely with issues about what should be permitted or prohibited. But the arts are secondary; the primary issue always is one of power, a battle over which group's values and standards shall prevail" (Brockett 1). The issues in the play stem not from Kalidasa's alleged obscenity in the canto, but the fact that Kalidasa paints a picture which allows for a different interpretation of the narratives already confirmed by those institutions, leading to the issue becoming an epistemic battle and a battle about holding and hoarding the popular imagination of the masses.

Knowledge, accessibility, and freedom of expression within the realms of the play are governed by the institution of religion, whose 'rule', or rather word, is solidified by the monarchy and implemented and upheld by the classes directly below them. When Kalidasa presents a picture of gods that differs from that of the accepted word, he is in the process of toppling the accepted knowledge, the knowledge that has been deemed the common sense of the people. The silencing of such an expression must begin by restoring the status quo and consolidating the hegemony of the ruling classes, which is achieved by setting up a committee made up of representatives from different upper-class sectors of the society, and only one sole artist in Saumitra, to bend the general perception in the direction of the ruling word (Verma 43). Throughout the play, the ruling classes strived to maintain their rule over the common masses, going so far as censoring a court poet of the reputation of Kalidasa in the garb of maintaining social and religious harmony lest it corrupts the innocent mind of the masses who constantly remain, passive agents, denied a voice. This hegemony is once again maintained through the workings of manufactured consent and the

idea of brutal force. As Antonio Gramsci has noted that these two aspects, "...balance each other reciprocally without force predominating excessively over consent. Indeed, the attempt is always to ensure that force would appear to be based on the consent of the majority expressed by the so-called organs of public opinion..." (Gramsci 81), where the consent is fabricated from a people who do not have any voice, any agency, within the play, and the power of consensual brutal force is felt when it is implied that the public would either want Kalidasa exiled or imprisoned or worse (Verma 54), effectively leaving no decision in the hands of either the public or Kalidasa, while using one against the other, denying them both freedom and agency.

The confinement of the freedom of expression of the artist and the monitoring of their work begins at a very early stage within the play, specifically where the language used by Kalidasa is subject to questions and remarks by Dindanaga, a peer, who reflects on the apparent impurity of the language used in the poem and the freedom Kalidasa has taken with it (29). Roland Barthes believes that

True censorship, however, consists not in forbidding (in abridging, omitting, starving out) but in excessively nourishing, preserving, keeping, suffocating, and immersing in (intellectual, romantic, erotic) stereotypes, only administering the recognized words of others, the rehashed substance of familiar opinion as the only sustenance. The true instrument of censorship is not the police, it is the commonplaces. In the same way a language defines itself better by way of what it compels one to say (its compulsory rubrics) than by way of what it forbids one to say (its rhetorical rules), societal censorship exists not where one prevents from saying, but instead where one forces to say, so social censorship is not found where speech is hindered, but where it is constrained (Barthes 132).

The same sentiment is echoed by King Chandragupta when he insists Kalidasa remove the name of the gods from a work specifically about those gods to appease the various levels of the society or risk facing the wrath of those he irks (54). This method of

censoring is much more layered and subtle than the usual outright outcry one is subjected to and forces the artist in question to not just conform but also to self-censor to express and become a product of the same environment one set out to reject or correct. Rather than censor himself or reject the advice of the King, Kalidasa chooses to completely abandon the work instead, opting not to make the text public in a bid to affirm his artistic integrity and self-esteem. But the mechanism of censorship and hegemony have already won here when they have successfully made an established artist like Kalidasa retract his much-awaited and acclaimed poem, whose seven cantos had already been made public, and made him question the position of the artist in the society, the relationship of art and religion, and whether the latter is even possible without the support of the former. The entire outcome of the process of censorship and Kalidasa's renunciation of his own work can be surmised by Bourdieu's opinion on self-censorship and how the contents of both form and expressions are chained by the structure of the field when he opines that, "Censorship is the most perfect and the least visible when every social agent has nothing to say except what they are objectively allowed to say: In this case, they do not even have to perform self-censorship, for with the internalized forms of perception and expression asserted in every expression, they are effectively censored once and for all" (qtd. in Bachleitner 3).

The status of knowledge and all the inaccessibility around it is power's way of keeping the masses at bay, in doubt, and in awe of those who do wield all the information and are allowed into this tower of mystery and influence. It is represented as a burden not all can carry so that the masses are not just influenced but also feel indebted to those who do carry the supposed immense weight of these responsibilities. The institutions and the classes in power and domination constantly push and legitimize the narratives of their control in order to maintain the status quo and the idea of normalcy around it; control which must remain guarded from the questions of the common people, while promising to safeguard their interests. Noam Chomsky believes that, "the idea behind royalty was that there's this other species of individuals who are beyond the norm and who the people are not supposed to understand. That's the standard way you cloak and protect power: you make it look

mysterious and secret, above the ordinary person—otherwise why should anybody accept it?” (Chomsky 30). The many institutions and those who solidify their rule must keep knowledge sacred lest it become common not as a means of learning but as a means of elevating one’s position. For the religious institutions of Ujjaini, Kalidasa threatened to supersede their seat and make the knowledge only afforded to them familiar and accessible. What Kalidasa does then is not just express his artistic views and imaginations but create a new language of discourse available to the masses, which leads the arguments of this paper to the concepts of contra-censorship and counter-hegemony.

Kalidasa, for all intents and purposes, is not actively creating or birthing a new language. Instead, his artistic vision helps in realizing the latent subversive potential of his art, which helps in forming a new language in the discourse of religious and cultural matters, extending and expanding the definition how one can view a deity, or how our gods can instead be seen in our image, with the latter notion being viewed as an egregious display of his craft by the powers to be. Roland Barthes believes that, “The ultimate subversion (contra-censorship) does not necessarily consist in saying what shocks public opinion, morality, law, the police, but in inventing a paradoxical discourse: invention (and not provocation) is a revolutionary act: it cannot be accomplished other than in setting up a new language” (Barthes 132). When Kalidasa is making public the intimate conjugal life of gods, he is creating a discourse which opens up the possibilities of viewing them in a more humane, approachable light where the common masses can form a more personal connection with those they worship. The institutions take this as an affront not just to their beliefs about the sacredness of their gods and what they consider to be their “private life”, but also to Kalidasa opening up their lives, and by extension the knowledge held by these institutions, to newer interpretations, challenging the epistemic hold they have over the populace. This creation of a new language, or interpretation of knowledge, presents a tool that potentially has the power to topple the cultural and social capital and supremacy of certain institutes and those who represent them, presenting the opportunity of possibly making them or their need redundant or obsolete. This fear, and the desire to maintain the

epistemic grip over the masses, drives the argument to not just ban and censor the poem in question, but to publically humiliate the creator lest others be tempted to follow suit and challenge those in power in any which way. This fear also moves the ruling classes to eliminate the masses from any decision-making regarding the fate of the poem, not giving them any space to even decide if the work can be harmful for them, simply because it has threatened their own authority and seat, and they cannot risk the public indulging Kalidasa, or having any agency in the matter. Hence, the derision of the artist from all corners of the state which supposedly represent the public interest, and hence the pressure applied on an otherwise sympathetic king, and, as Foucault insists, “It is a question of forming obedient individuals” (*Discipline and Punish* 140).

This pressure created in any hegemonic rule also invites the opportunity to retaliate or rise against it in whatever capacity possible, leaving room for resistance and affording space for possible subversion. Foucault, who believes freedom to be an ongoing, constant, struggle where power is present and exercised in our various every day relations, on differing levels, and resistance to that power being a common feature of that dynamic, noting that, “These struggles are not exactly for or against the ‘individual’ but rather they are struggles against the ‘government of individualization’” (“The Subject and Power” 6). In *Aathva Sarg* Kalidasa faces a similar individualization in the play where the institutions of faith, monarchy, and even certain sectors of art, turn against him and influence, or rather impose, a similar turn in the masses as well. In the play his struggles do not end when he abandons the poem, rather, he continues to combat the institutions with newer art, this time by writing something that will appease the ruling classes and the masses alike, in the shape of the play *Abhigyanshakuntalam*, a tale of love, romance, separation, and eventual union. The play sees a turn in the fortunes of Kalidasa as he once again becomes the revered court poet post *Abhigyanshakuntalam*, who now talks about more acceptable themes after shunning the alleged obscenity and vulgarity of his previous work. This does not imply the compromise of his ideals, rather, this is Kalidasa making a space for himself where he can lay down a stronger foundation for retaliation and protest as hegemony

is inherently unstable with power being in a constant flux with temporary arrangements, leaving room for counter-hegemonic discourse. A counter-hegemonic discourse must pave its way to acceptance and alignment within the local struggle and Kalidasa's attempt through his latest play gets him the support of the masses that he previously lacked, propelling his status to a height where the institutions can't challenge him lest they lose their own support. Gramsci defines hegemony as, "a continuous process of formation and superseding of unstable equilibria ... between the interests of the fundamental group and those of the subordinate groups ... equilibria in which the interests of the dominant group prevail, but only up to a certain point" (Qtd in Barker and Jane 112), leaving space for the hegemonic control to be constantly acquired and maintained, a struggle Kalidasa partakes in this war of attrition with the ruling institutions.

Conclusion

By the end of *Aathva Sarg* it has been established that neither does Kalidasa require the support of the monarchy, nor does he fear the institution of religion anymore, as his newfound popularity with the masses will ensure stricter scrutiny by them regarding any attempts made at his life or reputation. He asserts that, "At one point in my life I required power and status but not anymore. If the government bans my work, it will be read in a different state. If they imprison me, they will be called evil-minded and shrewd. And if they murder me, the masses will rain down upon them like the first rainfall of the blackest clouds of the monsoon" ("जीवन के इक मोड़ पर सत्ता की सहायता की आवश्यकता थी...अब नहीं है। अगर शासन मेरी रचना पर रोक लगाएगा, तो वो दूसरे राज्य में सुनी जाएगी। मुझे बंदीगृह में डाल दे तो संकिरणबुद्धि और कुटिलमन कहलाएगा। और अगर मेरी हत्या कर देगा, तो लोकमत उसके विरुद्ध आषाढ़ के पहले काले-कजरारे मेघों के समान भड़क उठेगा, my trans.; Verma 71). The tide of power and the dynamic with the masses has most certainly turned by the end of the play, so much so that the play ends with the manuscript of 'Kumarasambhavam' in Kalidasa's hands and him contemplating whether he should complete the unfinished text now that the power and influence is flowing in a different direction and that the institutions can no longer censor or silence him, establishing his effective counter-

hegemonic struggle. Judith Butler asserts that, “Censorship is always the instrument of the weak. Yes, it wields power, but it confesses that matters are already out of the control of those who use it. Censorship is deployed by those who seek to contain or eliminate a point of view they do not want to be heard. It attributes great power to that point of view...” (Butler, “There Can Be No Critique” n.p.). Kalidasa manages to not just carve out his own place post his struggle with those in power, he manages to assert the dominance of his own position and self, subverting the narrative around him and challenging the flow of power. The institution of religion moved against Kalidasa to eliminate his point of view but, in the process, exposed the weakness and insecurity of their own position and handed him the opportunity to launch a counter-hegemonic discourse which could always potentially topple their hold on the masses, which, in due time, it did.

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