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Sacrifice and Fulfillment in the Fire and the Rain

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Abstract: *The Fire and the Rain is Karnad's transcreation in English Published in 1998, of the Kannada version of his play titled "Agni Mattu Male". The play is based on the myth of Yavakri taken from chapters 135-138 of the "Vana Parva" (Forest Canto) of the Mahabharata. It is a tale told by the ascetic Lomasha to the Pandavas during the course of their exile. The Fire and the Rain with its symbolic and allegorical overtones is a dramatic representation of the quintessential conflict between good and evil. The play begins with a Prologue, is divided into three Acts and ends with an Epilogue. Bharatamuni, in his Natyasastra, has described the major and the minor types of drama (rupakasand uparupakas). Out of the ten kinds of rupakas, the type referred to as the 'samavakara' appears to be analogous to the dramatic structure of Karnad's play. In the samavakara type of drama, the theme is borrowed from well-known legends of gods and demons. It consists of three Acts presenting "... the three kinds of description, the three kinds of excitement or the three kinds of love" (Gupta, 116). 'Fire' is the dominant metaphor which engulfs the dramatic action of the play. The fire of passion, lust, revenge and betrayal consume both good and evil. The flaming hostility between the two cousins, Parvasu and Yavakri, scorch the lives of all the principal characters. The dramatic action moves between the two opposing polarities of Yavakri's vengeance and Arvasu's humanity.*

I. INTRODUCTION

The Fire and the Rain is Karnad's transcreation in English Published in 1998, of the Kannada version of his play titled "Agni Mattu Male". The play is based on the myth of Yavakri taken from chapters 135-138 of the "VanaParva" (Forest Canto) of the Mahabharata. . The Fire and the Rain with its symbolic and allegorical overtones is a dramatic representation of the quintessential conflict between good and evil. The play begins with a Prologue, is divided into three Acts and ends with an Epilogue. The Prologue begins with the ritual of a seven-year-long fire sacrifice being held by the king of the realm to propitiate Indra, the god of rains. Parvasu is the chief priest who conducts the ceremony. The supernatural element in the form of the Brahma Rakshasa, a key figure in the play, is introduced at this point. The Brahma Rakshasa is a cursed Brahmin soul, caught in the emptiness between death and rebirth. Unless redeemed from the impossible situation, the Brahma Rakshasais doomed to wander restlessly and painfully through eternity. The Prologue sets the tone of the play. Arvasu, the brother of Parvasu, pleads with him for permission to stage a play, one of the accepted rituals at a yagnya. However, it is an accepted practice that Brahmins would not act, since acting was considered frivolous and not appropriate to their dignity. Arvasu in a message to Parvasu writes, "... today I am a criminal. I have killed my father, a noble Brahmin. I already stand tarnished. I may now become an actor ... so please do not bar the way now" (FR, 3). Parvasu agrees in spite of opposition from the king who says, "To permit a condemned criminal in the vicinity of our sacrificial fires, to risk at this stage ..." (FR, 4). The incomplete utterance of the king is completed by Parvasu, who states, "Perhaps the sacrifice needs danger" (FR, 4). Besides, to placate Indra, a fire sacrifice was not enough, A play had to be performed along with it. Arvasu is exultant at the thought of Parvasu being there to watch the play because he thinks that "brother knows and I know that this isn't the real thing. This is a fiction, borrowed from the myths. The real play began somewhere else. A month ago. A month?... It seems ages and ages of darkness ago" (FR, 4). "Darkness" recalls the never-ending saga of conspiracies within conspiracies which form the content of the next three Acts. Myth and ritual intertwine to redefine the concept of reality. In the action that subsequently unfolds under the influence of good and evil powers, the people in the drama, it would appear, function as mere agents of this metaphysical battle. The ritual of the fire sacrifice has connotations of similar rituals taken from myths and legends and histories. The riddle-asking Sphinx of Oedipus Rex, the "mouse trap" of Hamlet, the myth of the Fisher King in Eliot's *The Waste Land*, the sacrifice of the king for the benefit of the community in ancient times - all have one underlying theme. Redemption of mankind from greater evil requires or necessitates the sacrifice of innocence and virtue. Good and evil co-exist. Without the death of innocence, there can be no death of vice. Evil is accepted as part of the good in Indian aesthetics. Creation and destruction as symbolized in the Goddess Kali are the two aspects of the Universe, the Prakriti and Purusha, Without destruction there is no regeneration. When evil dies, good is also sacrificed. But death is not an end in itself. The vibhavas used by the artist enable the transcendence of minor sentiments of the play and arrive at a major emotion which is impersonal, and therefore aesthetic. The metaphor of the 'Rain' in the play is symbolic not only of regeneration but also of redemption. In Act I, Nittilai's and Arvasu's love is defined. Arvasu, a Brahmin, is prepared to sacrifice his caste and community to marry the low-caste Nittilai, a hunter's daughter. The play also explains Yavakri's return after ten years of rigorous penance to seek the gift of Universal Knowledge from Indra. He

was granted the boon, though unwillingly by Indra, when he "stood in the middle of a circle of fire and started entrails, his tongue, and at last, his heart ..." (FR, 9). Yavakri's egoism and his carefully orchestrated plan of vengeance is well exemplified in the next incident. He deliberately seduces Vishakha, once his beloved but now his cousin Parvasu's wife, and makes sure that Arvasu and Raibhya, Vishakha's father-in-law and his uncle, are aware of the fact. He tells Vishakha, "I cried at the humiliations piled on my father. He was one of the most learned men in the land ... But he was scorned while this unscrupulous brother of his grabbed all the honours ... My father deserved to be invited as the Chief Priest of the sacrifice. But that too went to Parvasu, your husband"¹. He scorns Indra's injunction that knowledge involves control of passions, serenity and objectivity. Instead, he retaliates angrily, No, that's not the knowledge I want ... That's suicide! This obsession. This hatred. This venom. All this is me ... I want knowledge so I can be vicious, destructive (FR, 23). However, he becomes the target of Raibhya's venom. He is killed by the Brahma Rakshasa, who though invoked through penance by Raibhya, fulfill its mission through the betrayed Vishakha's anger-In Act II, the imminent betrothal of Arvasu and Nittilai does not take place. Parvasu returns to the hermitage 'unexpectedly'. He is equally egoistic. He states, "One can practice austerities like your foot Yavakri to coerce the gods to bend to one's will... And when they going, what do you do? Extend the begging bowl ... As though one defined human beings by their begging - I despise it" (FR, 31). He has agreed to conduct the fire sacrifice because it was a formal involving no emotional acrobatics from the participants would bring Indra to him, and if anything went wrong, it would have to be set right by a man. By him. "That's why when the moment I shall confront Indra in silence. As an equal" (FR, 32). The moment does come; but he prefers death to any explanation. Parvasu's venom is within him. He kills Raibhya intentionally: "He deserved to die. He killed Yavakri to disturb me in the last stages of my sacrifice. Not to punish Yavakri, but to be even with me. I had to attend to him before he went any further (FR, 33). Parvasu instructs Arvasu to perform the rites of penance as he had to return to the fire sacrifice. Moreover, as Raibhya's son, it was Arvasu's prerogative and duty to cremate the body and concentrate on the penitential rites. The Brahma Rakshasa appears at the moment and begs Parvasu to release him from his torment. But Parvasu refuses, stating: "I am not interested in your final release. I am not even interested in my final release" (FR, 36). The Act ends, with Parvasu accusing Arvasu of patricide and refusing, to allow the latter to enter the ritual precincts. Treachery, pride, lust and disillusionment mark the dramatic fabric of Act II. In Act III, Nittilai, who by now is married to another, leaves her husband to nurse the badly beaten Arvasu back to health. Parvasu's treacherous betrayal had nearly killed Arvasu at the hands of the King's soldiers. Nittilai is the gentle counsellor who restrains Arvasu from seeking vengeance against Parvasu. She says, "Leave that to the gods, Arvasu. Look at your family. Yavakri avenges his father's shame by attacking your sister-in-law. Your father avenges her by killing Yavakri. Your brother kills your father. And now you in your turn want vengeance - where will it all end?" (FR,43). The Act ends with Arvasu Pitting on the mask of Vritra, the demon, to be enacted at the precinct of the fire sacrifice. The Epilogue subsumes ritual into a mythical enactment of the universal theme of treachery and final redemption through sacrifice and selflessness. The myth is that of conflict between Indra and the brothers Viswarupa and Vritra. In a scene reminiscent of Satan's "Slighted pride" and "injured merit" in Milton's Paradise Lost Book I, Indra, the King of Gods,² vows vengeance against Brahma, the Father of All Creation, for preferring Viswarupa to him. Indra feels that his sovereignty over the three worlds was being threatened by Viswarupa, King of Men, and Brahma's second son from a mortal, whose sense and compassion inspired a love in others that makes Indra like the "eclipsed moon". His plan is to kill Viswarupa through means or foul. Viswarupa appears indestructible because he is eternally guarded by Brahma's third son, Vritra, a demon, born of a female from the netherworld. Brahma makes Vritra the King of the Nether World. Vritra's duty as enjoined by Brahma is to protect Viswarupa from Indra's "venom", laying down his own life if necessary. Indra's plan is to invite Viswarupa to a fire sacrifice to be held in honour of Brahma. The occasion suggests to him the means to hold Viswarupa because Vritra being a demon would not be allowed isolated the ritual enclosure as per the sastras. Despite Vritra's warnings, the innocent Viswarupa accepts Indra's invitation saying that "one must obey one's brother" (FR, 55). Viswarupa is treacherously killed by Indra who moves behind him, takes up his thunderbolt and plunges it into Viswarupa's back. The analogy is not lost on Parvasu, who has been an impassive spectator till then. With guilt and fear he utters, "They understand nothing, the fools. Indra didn't mean to kill them ..." (FR, 55). His self-control continues to crumble "as he cries out that it was fear that made Indra, and by implication himself, commit such a dastardly act. This moment of recognition, as in Hamlet's 'play within a play' is crucial for it alone gives drama its truth and significance. Even the Brahma Rakshasa despises him now, and rejects his offer of help. But Parvasu's shout acts as a catalyst for Arvasu. The symbolic mask of Vritra slips and he cries out to Indra, "Another treachery! Another filthy death! How long will these rats crawl around my feet vomiting blood? I must put an end to this conspiracy ..." (FR, 56). With these words he attacks Indra. When the Actor-Manager"³. Ritual now acquires a transgressive and subversive function. Arvasu becomes Vritra the demon in search of vengeance. Arvasu's earlier mask of deference and obedience is now replaced with a realistic representation of an actual empirically verifiable reality dressed as Indra runs, Vritra pursues him shouting, "You can elude me Indra, but you can't escape me. Even if you fly like a

falcon across ninety-nine rivers I'll find you. I'll destroy you. I'll raze your befouled sacrifice to the ground. I'll burn down the sacrifice outside the literary text. The sacrificial fire is desecrated by the hungry villagers who greedily snatch the food and drinks offered to the gods. In the ensuing confusion, Parvasu, in an act of final defiance, walks calmly into the blazing enclosure and immolates himself. Arvasu feels that Parvasu has finally won and he tells Nittilai,, "I lost, Nittilai. And ParaVasu won. He went and sat there in front of the altar, unafraid and carried on with the sacrifice ... He went up in flames while I stood watching, untouched" (FR, 58). This is followed by Nittilai's death at the hands of her husband and brother. Arvasu decides to kill himself, to be able to go with her into the other world where nothing would keep them separate and where nothing mattered - neither her goodness nor his stupidity, nor is the world evil; where the fire would have reduced everything to ashes. But this was not to be. Indra, pleased with Arvasu earlier challenge, grants him a boon. Indra says that the favour could also be the result of the gods' pleasure with Parvasu's sacrifice and Nittilai's humanity. While the crowd screams for rain, Arvasu, selfishly, only wants that Nittilai should come back to life. This creates complications, as Iindra explains: "... once the wheel of Time starts rolling back, there's no saying where it'll stop. Along with Nittilai, others too may return to life ..." (FR, 59). The intervention of the Brahma Rakshasa resolves the complication. The text is now structured around a dialogue between Arvasu and the Brahma Rakshasa. In Dr. Faustus, Marlowe had introduced the demons on the stage to drag Faustus to Hell. Here, the demon exudes a benign influence on Arvasu by dramatically, manifesting Arvasu's unconscious conflict between desire and guilt. The demon begs Arvasu to free him from his torment. He states, "Your father invoked me. He ordered me to. kill Yavakriand . I did. I have done my duty and now I wander lost, in torment. Help nie, Arvasu" (FR, 60). Since Arvasu's father had given him life, Arvasu and he were now brothers, and it was Arvasu's duty to complete what his father could not. Arvasu finally chooses to release the Brahma Rakshasa, for according to the latter, if Nittilai lived again she would be tormented by the knowledge that her resurrection would have condemned the Brahma Rakshasa to a life beyond salvation. Mercy triumphs, love triumphs, and Arvasutranscends the limitations of his individual ego and asks Indra to release the Brahma Rakshasa. With this comes the longed-for rain. Arvasu's renunciation of Nittilai and Nittilai's sacrifice spring from positive love and an absolute morality which exhorts the development of positive virtues. True sacrifice is that of love, especially that which is for the benefit of humanity. It cleanses and purifies, like gentle rain, the 'fallen' state of this world. Even the gods are not impervious to this display of divinity within man. Enlightenment is emancipation. But certain circumstances have to be created to make this possible. Myths project an undifferentiated view of life. Beneath the superficial differences, there is the universal realm of a noble humanity. But opportunities have to be created to awaken this innate humanity. The play begins with the dominant myth of Yavakri. It places the action that follows in the realm of the mythical and the elemental. The quest for personal and social meanings through the myth contribute to the cohesive structure of the play. It involves the nature of the world in which the greatest reality is the reality of man. There is a sensitive analysis of the concept of morality and emotion which leads one to the essentiality of human experience itself. The myth of Vritra and Indra acts as a catalyst to free Parvasu and Arvasu from the human bondage of fear and vengeance. The Prologue and the Epilogue are inevitably conjoined to project a holistic view of life. In *The Fire and the Rain*, ritual is redeemed though myth which embodies reality in a concrete way. It offers one a glimpse of universal spiritual truths. This philosophical framework helps one in understanding the situations in the play. The nature of drama is dialectical, and it can often use philosophy or religion to explicate a problem. The humanization of myth in *The Fire and the Rain* gives a totality of meaning to the play - the main idea being the unity of being, Karnad's re-working of the Yavakri myth in his play is a technique which most dramatists-follow. Not only does it allow the playwright to extend the dimensions of his art, but he is also assured of a definite set of emotional responses from his audience. The conflict within man is the result of his excessive obsession with the pursuit of his own desires. Humanism exhorts one to be good and do good to others, and live in harmony and amity. In *The Fire and the Rain*, the myth of Yavakri is contemporized to communicate an aesthetic experience of salvation. It is the central informing power that gives archetypal significance to the ritual of self-discovery. Myth and ritual cohere to unfold the deeper meaning of life. The irony of life itself is woven into the moral fabric of the play. One assumes that love is the only principle that can help one to transcend the limitations of the Self. It enable one to regain an integrated perception of life, transmuting into practical reality the essential principle of Satyam, Sivam, Sundaram : Truth as Eternally Beautiful!From among the innumerable tales that fill the Mahabharata, Girish finds a fit subject for the plot of his play *The Fire and the Rain* 'the narrative of Parvasu, Arvasu and Yavakri. In the unrighteous, emonical tale of the degradation of Yavakri, his cousin Paravasuannd ? is uncle Raibhya, Karnad locates his plot of vanity and depravity, Karnad's play dramatizes the archetypal fratricidal strife between Indra and his brothers Viswarupa and Vritra as recounted in the Veda *Rig*. The narrative describes the way Indra killed Vritra to defeat the lowers of 'drought and darkness' and to release heavenly waters and sherinlight. The mythical tale from the *Rig Veda* provides the k for the plot of Karnad's play and similar values set the tone action. The vengeful killings that overpower human relationship as the conflict between Parvasu, Arvasu, and their usinYavakri expand into a mortal feud for knowledge, superiority Power.⁴The play

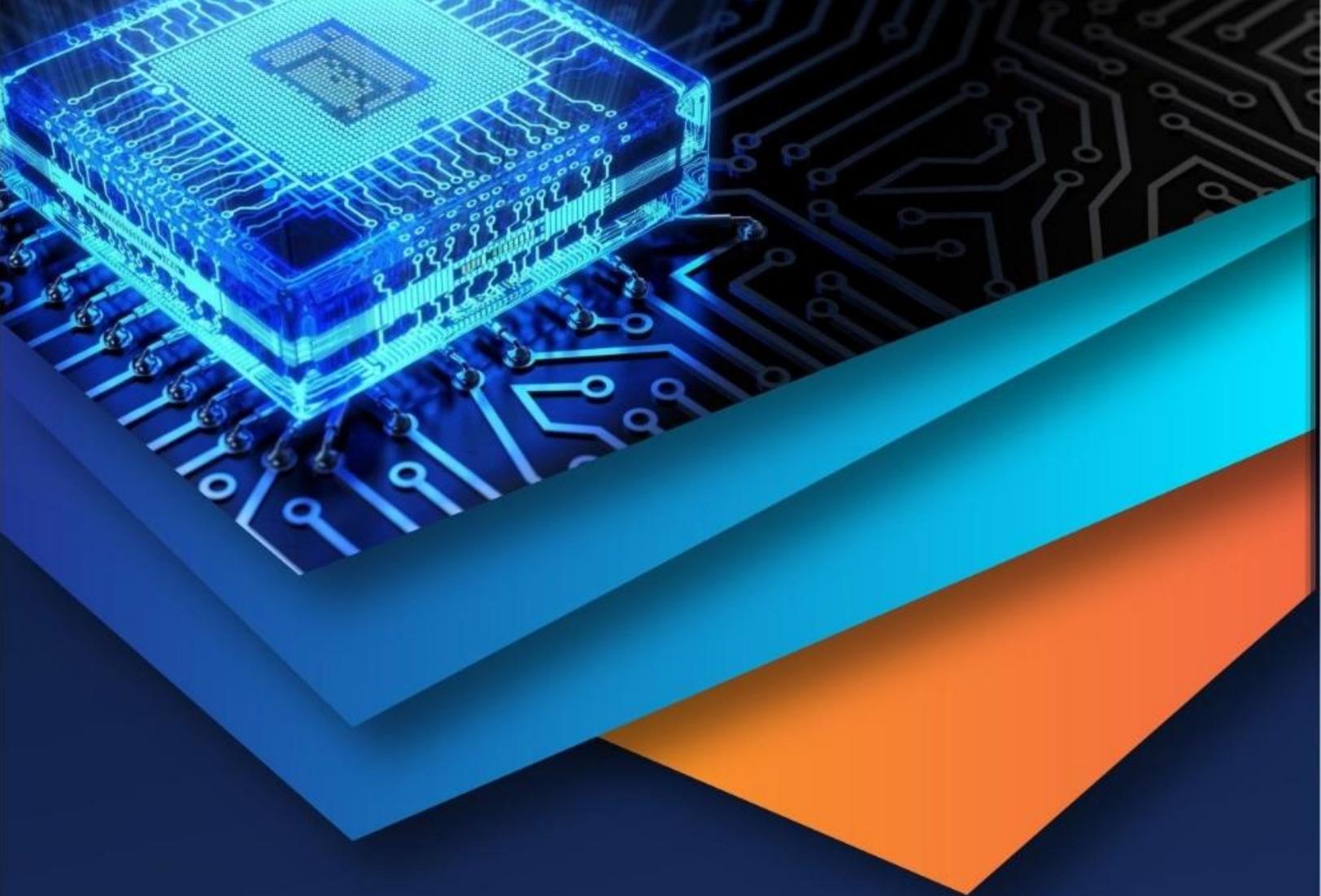
opens with a seven-year fire sacrifice being conducted to please Indra, the god of rains, so that the land can be redeemed from a drought that has afflicted it for seven long years. As the sacrifice nears its completion, the Chief Priest Parvasu warns that evil powers would try their best to thwart the final oblation that Parvasu would announce the successful completion of the yajna. During the interval in the rituals, at the behest of a group of actors that Parvasu has banished, he permits a play to be performed to see Indra. Around the same time, sage Bharadwaja's son Yavakri returns in a strenuous seven-year penance after acquiring "Knowledge of the Absolute." It is whispered that though he coerced Indra to grant him a boon for knowledge, what he has actually received in his thirst for 'knowledge' is very "little wisdom". But at least he now knows "what can't be achieved" (FR, 14). After his return, Yavakri learns that his youthful love Vishakha is married to Parvasu, and that Parvasu has been appointed the Chief Priest for the king's ritual instead of his father, Yavakri avenges his jealousy by seducing Vishakha. Resentful of Parvasu's abandonment of her for seven years to be present at the King's fire sacrifice, Vishakha becomes an easy prey to Yavakri's vile design. As the rumour of Vishakha's infidelity spreads through the city, the Chief Priest Parvasu secretly visits his hermitage to meet his wife in the darkness of the night. He is aware that this transgression could mar the sanctity of the ritual, because departures from the sacred precincts of the ritual or the indulgence in sensual acts — like sexual relationships - were sacrilegious and could lead to harmful results. In fact, it was not uncommon to come across accounts of chief priests risking their personal well-being for the sake of successful performance of such sacrifices. But Parvasu appears unmindful of the transgression. This deepens the complexity of the plot and subjects it to unexpected twists until Indra himself appears with his offer to remove famine from the land at a price, as is the wont of gods in ancient mythology. Some clear messages are conveyed through the play that cannot be overlooked: that Brahmins, in spite of their loud claims about possessing the 'knowledge of the Brahman', have like common men the propensity to jealousy, revenge, rape and incest with their consequent vicious effects; and that the individual attainment of knowledge has no value unless that knowledge is conjoined with humane concerns. As can be expected, at the end of the sacrificial ritual, it is not Parvasu but the simple-minded Arvasu who experiences the revelatory epiphany of Indra. Only the innocent and kind Nittilai and the generous Arvasu have in them the potential to redeem the parched land, since they know what it is to be human. They are "capable of mercy can understand pain and suffering as the gods can't" (FR, 61), and unlike the other more 'important' men, are able to forgive and live (or die) for the larger good of mankind. In short, the meaninglessness of sacrifice and penance for selfish gain and the need for transcending human weaknesses to hone one's intellect to "Become a diamond. Unscratchable" (FR, 32) is stressed. The play clearly emphasizes that compassion for the oppressed is what makes a person 'beautiful' and 'wise'.⁵ Theatre is a desirable mode of expression for human society since theatre, like the sacrificial ritual, "involve(s) performance, precise gestures, speech, and a carefully worked out action" (Notes to FR, 69), leading to enlightenment and grace (in the form of life-giving rains in this play). The point that must be borne in mind is that the journey of life is itself a like ritual, into which one's ego and desires such as Kama, krodha, lobha, moha, mada, matsaryahave to be sacrificed. As it can happen in a sacrifice, the journey of the human soul toward enlightenment too can be disrupted either through human agency or through the Intervention of the brahma raks has a that lies in wait within the mind. Or it can take the shape of a 'Yavakri' as it happens in the case of Arvasu, or of a 'husband' and a 'brother' as in the case of Nittilai. In this human drama, the role of the gods who seem to be mere witnesses to the enactment of human strife and suffering cannot be overlooked. They appear to grant boons to man, in this instance in the shape of the much longed for rain, only when man threatens to arrest the flow of time.

II. CONCLUSION

The play opens with a seven-year fire sacrifice being conducted to please Indra, the god of rains, so that the land can be redeemed from a drought that has afflicted it for seven long years. As the sacrifice nears its completion, the Chief Priest Parvasu warns that evil powers would try their best to thwart the final oblation that Parvasu would announce the successful completion of the yajna.

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