

Socio-Cultural Elements in Mattavilasa Prahasana of Mahendravarma-I

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Abstract – The history of Indian Sanskrit Theater shows a vast textual tradition. But its practice is very limited nowadays. Mattavilasa Prahasana of king Mahendravarma-I is still in practice and it is very notable because of its content. The farce Mattavilasa strongly oppose the meaningless religious practices that existed in the period of seventh century AD in South India. This paper is an attempt to analyze the socio-cultural aspects of Mattavilasa Prahasana.

Keywords: Indian Drama-Dasharoopaka-Mahendravarma-Mattavilasa Prahasana- Socio-Cultural Elements.

I. INTRODUCTION

The Naatyasastra Bharatamuni is the first book to write a comprehensive account of the Indian drama. The period of Naatyasastra is believed to be the second century BC to the third century AD [1]. From this, it is clear that the Indian theatrical tradition existed even before the time of Bharata. Observations of Bharata towards the drama proves that the Indian drama was fully developed even before the period of Naatyasastra. In the twentieth chapter of Natyasastra, Bharata opined the ten dramatical forms existed in India. They are Nataka, Prakarana, Bhaana, Dima, Vyaayoga, Veethi, Samavagaara, Eehamruga, Anga, and Prahasana. These ten forms of drama are generally known as Dasharoopaka. Based on these ten dramatic forms, many writings are evolved. Among these texts, Dasharoopaka of Dhananjaya plays a very important role. He had given an elaborate meaning for these ten dramatic forms. Of these ten forms, Prahassana is the most important for comedy[2]. There are many Prahassanas (Farce) that evolved in Sanskrit dramatic tradition like Bhgavadajjuka, Daamaka, Saagarakaumudi. Among these Prahassanas, Mattavilasa Prahassana of king Mahendravarma I is prominent for its social criticism and it is still in practice in the Koodiyattam stages of Kerala.

II. MAHENDRAVARMAN-I

Mahendravarma I, also known as Mahendravikrama was one of the most prominent rulers in the Pallava Dynasty between 580-630 A.D. The contribution of Mahendrarman I in the field of religion, art, and literature are commendable [3]. He has assumed a bewildering variety of *birudas* (titles) after some of which he named his architectural caves. Many of these titles are seen alphabetically arranged in his inscription [4]. These titles are noteworthy since they throw adequate light on his personality. The play Mattavilasa Prahassana is the only book credited with his authorship, a considerable number of temples and caves exist inscribed with his names or the titles borne by him [5].

Mahendravarman I was initially a Jain and later converted to Shaiva. It was Appar also known as Thirunavakkarasar who attracted Mahendravarman I to Shaivism. He also worked to establish Shaivism in his country. The grandmother of Mahendravarman was a Jain and his father Simhavishu was a Vaishnavite. It is to be noted that Mahendravarman was a devout of Shaivite but not a fanatic. In the first rock-cut temple that he built at Mandangapattu in South Arcot, he installed the Trinity-Brahma, Shiva, and Vishnu. Remaining an ardent Shaivite he built cave temples for Vishnu at Mahendravaadi and Maamandur [6]. All these facts prove his attitude towards other religions. He was also unique in encouraging writers. He is also a good musician and has composed many Svaras(musical tones) independently [7]. He was also the author of the text Mattavilasa Prahāsana in Sanskrit. This book describes the contemporary activities of South India at that time.

III. MATTAVILASA PRAHASANA

The book Mattavilasa is a Prahāsana (farce) which includes in the ten dramatic forms of the Indian dramaturgy. The book is a story related to the recovery of a lost Kapala (skull-bowl) of a Kaapalika (Shaivite) Satyasoma. As the style of this book is a farce, the content is farcical.

3.1 The Plot of Mattavilasa Prahāsana

The plot of Mattavilasa Prahāsana takes place in the temple town Kanchipuram of Tamil Nadu which was the Pallava's capital city in those days. The play begins with the praising verse about Lord Shiva. The story centers on the drunken antics of Satyasoma a Kaapaalika mendicant and his women Devasoma. When Satyasoma likes to drink liquor he recognized that his Kapala is misplaced and they started searching the same. Since the skull – bowl had roasted meat, Satyasoma doubts that the Kapala was taken by a dog or a Buddhist monk. Simultaneously the Buddhist monk Naagasena enters the stage and Satyasoma immediately concludes that he is the person who had stolen the Kapala. As the fight continues, Babhrukalpa, (Paashupatha) another mendicant of a different Shaivite sect, acquaintance of Satyasoma enters and assumes the role of mediator. And so the dispute continues until, in absolute despair, the Buddhist monk Naagasena is ready to surrender his begging bowl which Satyasoma in his drunken misbelief believes to be his own Kapala.

Eventually, a madman enters and recovers the actual skull-bowl from a street dog. And, finally, the skull-bowl restored to its rightful owner. There is thus a happy resolution and all the characters pleasantly take leave of one another [8].

IV. THE SOCIO-CULTURAL ELEMENTS IN MATTAVILASA PRAHASANA

The farce Mattavilasa conveys numerous socio-cultural elements. The characters in this story belong to different religious sects of that period. The characters of Mattavilasa Prahāsana are Satyasoma, Devasoma, Naagasena, Babhrukalpa, and a madman. Satyasoma is a Shaivite from the Kaapalika sect of Shaivism who always bears Kapala (skull-bowl) in hand. Devasoma is the wife of Satyasoma. Naagasena is a degenerate Buddhist monk. Babhrukalpa is a Paashupatha- a Shaiva mendicant of another order. Through the conversation and behavior of these characters, the author gives a clear picture of the religions and religious evils of that time. His attitude towards other religions enabled him to understand the evil practices that existed in different religions. Through this work, he has ridiculed all these religious practices.

Satyasoma's alcoholism, meat-eating habits, erotic dialogue with Devasoma, and his disregard for Buddhism indicates the destruction of Shaivism in this period. In Mattavilasa the words of Satyasoma prove the same. Satyasoman presents the tavern as a Yaagashaala (the hall where Yaga is performed) to validate his drinking habit. He says that "Look! Look, my dear. This shop emulates the grace of a sacrificial post; alcohol the Soma juice; drunkards the priests; cups the bowls; condiments like roasted meats the oblations; talks of the intoxicated the Yajur-mantras; their songs the Sama hymns; leathern bags the sacrificial ladles; thirst the fire; and the keeper of the shop the patron of the sacrifices"[9]. Satyasoman abuses alcohol, a Shaivite tantric custom, for his pleasure. Similarly, Babhrukalpa's sexual interest in Devasoma and revenge on Satyasoma is also a strong example of the decline of Shaivism.

Mahendrarman highlights the conflicts between Shaivism and Buddhism through the words of Satyasoma. He jokingly says that Buddha was a thief and stole all the Dharma texts from the Mahabharata and Vedanta. Sure! That is why the Buddha has ordained you to wear so many clothes-for such hiding purpose". "Rather say 'Reverence to Kharapata' who propagated the science of theft. Or perhaps, the Buddha may be superior to Kharapata in this field. Why- He ere the very eyes of Brahmins. Has built a treasure of canons gathering the ideas from texts on Mahabharata. As also from texts on Vedanta"[10].

Buddhism as it is known today promotes non-violence, truthfulness, and the elimination of intoxication and addiction to women. But the Buddhist monk Naagasena criticizes all this and wonders why the Buddha did not allow this. The Buddhist mendicant, Naagasena, has received an alms-meal of fish and meat from the house of the merchant Dhanadaasa. And Naagasena mentions the aphrodisiac, Thaambula, in his of the many pleasure of monastery life. He only wonders to himself, why the Buddhist rulers do not also allow liquor and women [11].

The collapse of Buddhism at the time of Mahendrarman can be seen in these words of Buddhist monk Naagasena. Despite being a monk, Naganeseena's obsession with worldly pleasures is relevant throughout his words. The farce Mattavilasa proves without a doubt that Mahendrarman was a true Shaiva believer. This is clear from the number of shrines he constructed for Lord Shiva and the Naandi shloka (opening verse) of his work Mattavilasa Prahasana.

V. CONCLUSION

The decline of Shaivism and Buddhism is criticized throughout this book. The author makes it clear that meaningless rituals never lead us to the path of truth. The ultimate truth is depicted here as the skull. That is what is lost and a madman finds the same. Mahendrarman also hints that those who know the real truth are still seen by society as a madman. The royal writer, who himself was a staunch devotee of Lord Shiva, sharply criticized the moral breakdown of the religious leaders. His goal is to expose the deceitful clergy of the religion. Mahendrarman achieves this goal through words that resemble the sharp character of villains. This makes the work a delectable one.

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