

Vidushaka in Kūṭiyāṭṭam

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In those Sanskrit dramas which predominantly deal with the theme of love, there is a Vidushaka who appears as a friend of the hero, and is responsible for the comic action in the play. The Vidushaka is a Brahmin, a companion to the hero, who is a king. The Vidushaka has the freedom to enter even the women's quarters, without consulting the proper time. His chief task is to entertain the hero during his leisure time, by telling jokes and evoking humour. He has the title of 'minister of sport' (*narmasachiva*). His expertise is in maintaining the closeness between the hero and the heroine. In the plays of Bhasa, Kalidasa, Sudraka, etc., the Vidushaka has the traits of an anti-hero. Apart from evoking mirth and laughter from the spectators, these poets must have expected some other tasks also from the Vidushaka.

Kūṭiyāṭṭam is a mode of theatre belonging to Kerala. It is the enactment of Sanskrit drama and is held in the great temples of Kerala. This theatric form dates back to a thousand years. The Chakyars used to act elaborately the plays of ancient dramatists like Bhasa and Kalidasa; some of these plays are still being enacted on the stage. In Kūṭiyāṭṭam, the Vidushaka has a prominent place. The Vidushaka not only entertains the spectator, but through the medium of laughter, conveys information and knowledge on several matters and improves their mental faculties. The Vidushakas in Kūṭiyāṭṭam have ample verbal facility and are fluent in Prakrit, Sanskrit and Malayalam. They can elaborate any situation and improvise on any topic. They cite several interesting stories and provide a clear understanding on different matters to the spectator.

The meaning of the term 'Vidushaka' is nowhere more aptly suited than in Kūṭiyāṭṭam. Vidushaka is the one 'who highlights the *doshas* (faults) of others in a special manner'. What is this speciality? By relating to the main thread of the story, he narrates several episodes and minor anecdotes, interprets them effectively, and makes each spectator aware of his own faults and foibles. Each spectator is made to feel that the Vidushaka directs his satire at himself alone, highlighting the faults ingrained in him. He evaluates himself and tries to remove these faults. In this manner, the Vidushaka suggestively takes up the weaknesses of others, satirises and mocks them, and tries his best to reform them—this is a unique feature of the Vidushaka's art. This mode of satire is seen clearly in the 'tullals' of Kunchan Nambiar. In fact, the satirical vein in Kunchan Nambiar's poetry seems to have been derived from the Vidushakas of Kūṭiyāṭṭam.

In Kūṭiyāṭṭam, there are three types of Vidushakas. One of them is a great diplomat. Another variety of Vidushaka ridicules Buddhism and extols the Vedic religion. Some others represent the vitiated and corrupt practices of Brahminism. Based on the character of the Vidushaka, perhaps three important stages in the history of Kerala could be conceived.

In the repertoire of Kūṭiyāṭṭam plays, Mantrankam is considered to be the most ancient. Mantrankam is the third Act of Bhasa's *Pratijnayaugandharayana*. The three characters in the play are Kazhukkootunni, Bharrantan (madman) and Bauddhan (Buddhist). Actually these three men are the ministers of King Udayana, the king of Uatsa. They have reached Ujjaini in disguise, to evolve a strategy for releasing their king from the prison of Mahasena, the king of Ujjaini. Among them, Kazhukkootunni is Vasantaka, the 'minister-of sports' (*narmasachiva*), who has disguised himself as a Brahmin, begging for alms and engaging in gossip. He is the Vidushaka in the play. Yaugandharayana, the chief minister, has reached Ujjaini in the guise of Bharrantan, a mad man. Rumanvan, the minister, has donned the attire of a Bauddha, a Buddhist monk. Mantranka describes their meeting in the premises of an empty temple, their discussions and plan of action. Now, this act is performed in sixteen days. Kazhukkootunni, the Vidushaka, dominates the stage for almost the entire course of the play except two days, when he is absent.

From the first to the thirteenth day, Vasantaka describes the previous story in detail. He narrates how King Udayana, who had gone to catch elephants in Naga forest, is captured by Mahasena's minister, using a method of deception. Knowing this, Vasantaka pays obeisance to Lord Siva, receives his blessings, puts the *bhasma* mark on his forehead, takes a rod and a knapsack, assumes the guise of a Brahmin beggar, starts at an auspicious time and goes to meet Udayana in the prison. Stretching to thirteen days, this elaborate narration deals with the description of the path to be followed, as well as diplomatic strategies (paths) to be adopted.

When one path is followed, it divides into two. When one of the courses is taken, it gets split into four paths. Further, when one of them is followed, it is parted into six—this is how the narration goes. The first path is *atmodaya* and *parajñani*—i.e., the first path brings good luck to oneself and destruction to the enemy. When the first path is followed, the four paths are *sama* (gentle persuasion), *dana* (gift), *bheda* (reproach) and *danda* (torture). Again when the first of the courses is taken, it is split into *abhedoktisama* and *bhedoktisama*. When the journey continues through *abhedoktisama*, the six divisions are *sandhi* (truce), *yuddham* (war), *jaitrayatra* (victory march), *kathirippu* (waiting), *dvaidhibhavam* (duality) and *asrayam* (refuge). All these diplomatic strategies are elaborately explained according to the canons of *Arthasastra*. All the sights that are seen on the way, and also in the palace, are described vividly. The narration is interspersed with about twenty interesting stories and anecdotes: Some of them are: (1) The story of Paramangalam; (2) the story of the sowing of rice; (3) the birth of Vyasa; (4) the story of Kizhkkanthala ringing the bell; (5) the story of a tortoise providing a fountain to cure fever; (6) the supper at Bhavasarmattu; (7) the incarnation (of Vishnu) as Vamana; (8) the burning of Tripura; (9) the story of the bird; (10) the story of Chettiar.

Apart from these, the members of the communities of Pappar, Manikal, Kayyar, Kavaludayar, Vaidyan, Natan, Nambiar, Embran, Varier, Pattar, Chetti, Tuluvan, Thiyyati, Chomatiyan are subjected to the satire and criticism by the Vidushaka. But no distinctions are made in terms of superiority/inferiority status or in terms of caste. The Brahmin and the Buddhist priest work together for the welfare of the country and the king; they have mutual respect. The Brahmin subjects his Brahminhood to ridicule, and wonders at the intellectual acumen of the Buddhist monk. This may be regarded as the

first stage in the evolution of the character of the Vidushaka.

It is seen that during the middle period, the two plays *Bhagavadajjukiya* and *Mattavilasa* enjoyed a great deal of popularity and were subjected to elaborate action in Kūṭiyāttam. The Attaprakaram of *Bhagavadajjukiya* reveals that this one-act play took thirty-six days for its stage presentation in Kūṭiyāttam. Some parts from *Mattavilasa* are still performed, though rarely, in three days.

In *Bhagavadajjukiya*, the Vidushaka is Sandilya, the disciple of a monk known as Bhagavan. Sandilya's enumeration of his previous story includes how as a poor Brahmin he joined the Buddhist religion, mainly with the hope of getting a square meal a day. Fed up with the frugal life at the monastery, he leaves Buddhism, and come to the monk, to be his disciple. Here is how the Attaprakaram describes Sandilya's entry into the monastery and his subsequent exit:

In that manner, I asked each and everyone, "where can I get good food in the morning?" I got the answer, "There is enough food in the monastery." On hearing this, I reached the monastery in the morning. When I met the monks, they asked, "Son, why have you come here?" "I heard that food is available here, and thinking that I might be able to get some food, I have come here." "I see then you become a monk. Before that start chanting the three dictums, *Buddhan saranam gacchami, Dharmam saranam gacchami* and *Sangham saranam gacchami*." I did all that. I chanted the dictums. For becoming a monk, a man grows a tuft on his head and cleanse himself from head to foot. He wears a white cloth, and becomes a monk. He learns the 'five ways of instruction' (*panchasiikshapadam*). For observing 'Sramerana' rite, he takes off his sacred thread, and cuts off the tuft of hair. Looking upwards he chants "oordhvalokam gaccha," and wears it again. Wearing a red veil, he remains in hiding for four days, like a woman during her menstrual period. In this manner, Sramerana rite is to be observed for twenty years. Then, according to the dictum

Prāṇātipāṇā paravittahāradabrahmacharyādānṛat surādeḥ nṛtādimaladimahārhaṣayya-vikālabhukterajataadvirāmah. The ten 'means of instruction' (*patu sikshapadam*) should be learnt. Accompanied by monks who are conversant with the rules, he goes to the river bank and completes the rituals. Now with the observance of fast, the formalities are complete. He wears the three yellow robes worn by Buddhist monks. Tying the uppercloth (*uttarasangam*) and *kalabandham*, and putting *sanghati* on his back, he taken three begging bowls—*bhikshapitaka, abhidharmapitaka* and *anvabhisutrapitaka*—and learns the one crore means of instruction (*kotisikshapadam*). Then he becomes a full-fledged Buddhist monk. Now he describes the story of his leaving the monastery in this manner: These base monks eat their food every day, seven *nazhikas* after sunrise along with women from the lowest (Cherumi) castes. Then no food is taken till sunrise on the next day. I had thought that they give food once more in the evening. Without that-

Athazhasya prasadena
saktirbhavati pittennal
tasmat bhoktavyamathazham
muthazhattilumadaral

(The strength of the body comes from the supper taken on the previous night. So, more than lunch, supper should be taken every day.) According to this dictum, since they do not take their supper, the food taken in the morning is as good as having had no food at all. After joining the monastery, my hunger was doubled. The monks didn't need to eat again; if needed, they could eat once in between. But living without supper, my frustration increased; I started hating the monastery as well as the monks. One day I got very angry and decided to leave the monastery. I tore off the clothes, broke my begging bowls and left my studies also. I gave up the

customs of *dasabalanamatasayantanasamayaganapatha*, as well as lessons of *prajnaparamitaditagama*. I took away my umbrella from there, thinking that it would be of use during rains. Deciding that I will never look back, I came away from the monastery.

This narration is presented in an ancient form of Malayalam. The dislike for Buddhism is evident from this passage. *Mattavilasa* also contains the disparagement of Buddhism. This can be considered as the second phase of the evolution of Vidushaka. In fact, the hatred for Buddhism is seen in *Sanghakkali* also.

The Vidushakas in plays like *Nagananda*, *Subhadradhananjaya* and *Tapatisamvarana* represent the deterioration of values that characterised the Brahmin class at a later stage. Each of these Vidushakas, before coming under the services of a king gives an account of this previous life, and using that pretext presents a Vidushaka Kūttu lasting for four days. Here there is an elaborate exposition of *Vinoda* (Entertainment), *Vanchana* (Treachery), *Asana* (Eating food) and *Rajaseva* (service under a king). The 'purusharthas' in the traditional context are *Dharma* (Moral propriety), *Artha* (Material prosperity), *Kama* (Desire) and *Moksha* (Eternal emancipation). But in a degraded Brahmin society, in place of the original *purusharthas*, the preoccupations are with eating a sumptuous feast, serving under a king, enjoying the company of a prostitute and deceiving a prostitute. The Vidushaka's narration of this subverted interests is based on the following *sloka*:

Āmantraṇām brāhmaṇānām hi dharmah
severājñāmarthamūlam narāṇām
veśāstrīṣuprāptirevātra kāmō
bhūyāstāsām vañcanam mokṣahetuḥ

These Vidushakas do not refer to Buddhism, unlike their predecessors. The Vidushakas from the plays mentioned above belong to the beginning of the Malayalam era. They constitute the third type of Vidushaka found in Sanskrit drama.

There is no doubt that the place of Vidushaka in Kūṭiyāṭṭam is very important. He tries to bring about reform in the community, in a manner that is inconceivable to others.

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