



International Journal of Research Publication and Reviews

Journal homepage: www.ijrpr.com ISSN 2582-7421

TRADITIONS AND CUSTOMS WITH REFERENCE TO KALIDASA'S WRITINGS: AN OVERVIEW

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ABSTRACT:

Beliefs and practices constitute a major aspect of culture. Indian culture is not an exception. Every society can be marked with its peculiar beliefs and practices. Moreover, beliefs and practices prevailing in a particular society reveal a vivid picture of the cultural life of that society. Beliefs and practices have been deep-rooted in a particular culture through ages. The current of beliefs and practices flows continuously centuries after centuries with slight turns such as additions, modifications and violations. In this article the researcher has made an attempt to discuss the beliefs and practices as reflected in the writings of Kalidasa. For this purpose the researcher has followed all secondary sources. It has been indicated that the study of traditions and customs reflected in Classical Sanskrit Literature allows arriving at a broad perspective of the cultural and religious aspects of society along with the social attributes.

Keywords; Sanskrit Literature, Kalidasa, traditions, culture.

Introduction:

By universal consent, Kālidāsa is one of the greatest Indian poets. Still at the outset, it must be admitted that we have absolutely no trustworthy information regarding the personal history of Kālidāsa. His poetical production alone stands as an immortal monument of his surpassing poetic excellence. It seems that he was a *brāhmaṇa*, very well learned and a devout worshipper of Śiva, though by no means a sectarian. His name is associated with that of the epoch making king Vikramāditya of Ūjjayinī. It must be admitted that we have yet no direct and incontrovertible evidence for fixing the date of the poet such as could have been furnished by a contemporary inscription mentioning his name. We know, of course, of one Kālidāsa who is mentioned in a copper-plate grant of the Vākātaka king Pravarasena II, but he was a mere scribe and cannot, therefore, be identified with the illustrious Sanskrit poet. There is, however, much circumstantial evidence as shown above which leaves little room for doubt that Kālidāsa lived in c. A.D. 400 in the court of the well-known Gupta king Chandragupta II- Vikramāditya. He was aptly crowned the title 'Kavikulaguru'. The following is the list of works generally attributed to him: Khanḍakāvya - Ṛtusamhāra, Meghadūta. Mahākāvya - Kumārasambhava, Raghuvamśa. Plays - Mālvikāgnimitra, Vikramorvaśya, Abhijñānaśākuntala.

Significance of the Study:

It is believed that the analysis and in-depth study of traditions and customs reflected in classical Sanskrit Literature will significantly throw light on various aspects of Ancient Indian culture. A deep probe into various beliefs and practices will enable us to know various facets of Indian culture. Moreover, it can be observed whether and how the teachings of Dharmaśāstra were practiced in day-to-day life in ancient India. With this objective, classification, analysis and scrutiny of the beliefs and practices reflected in Classical Sanskrit Literature is carried out.

DISCUSSION:

Boon - (Vara / varadāna)

A boon is a verbal promise endowed by deities or sages or eminent personalities like kings. When a *sādhaka* seeks a deity by penance or when the sages and kings become extremely happy by the service rendered to them, they grant a boon. It is a practice to seek blessings on special occasions from deities, elders, sages, etc. When a very distinguished sage blesses someone, it is a matter of tremendous fortune. Such a blessing is not merely a blessing but it is considered to be a boon in disguise.

It is mentioned that 'being pleased' is one of the main reasons behind bestowing a boon, just as the holy cow asks to choose a boon, on being pleased –

भक्त्या गुरौ मय्यनुकम्पया च प्रीतास्मि ते पुत्र वरं वृष्णीष्व।
न केवलानां पयसां प्रसूतिमवेहि मां कामदुधां प्रसन्नाम्॥ (Raghu.II.63)

Some boons are such that they can be enjoyed at the required time, as per one's own wish. In Raghu. it is mentioned that Kaikeyī urges the two boons promised earlier by Daśaratha (Raghu.XIII.5).

Sometimes the boons bagged by one may prove to be very dreadful for others. The boon received by Rāvaṇa creates havoc among the deities since the nature of the boon is that Rāvaṇa will have no fear of death even from a celestial being (Raghu.X.42).

Concept of auspicious and inauspicious - (Maṅgala and amaṅgala)

There are certain occurrences, sounds, garments, signs, etc. which are believed to be auspicious or inauspicious depending upon the time and situation. Kālidāsa uses these concepts often especially in Kum., Raghu., Abhi. and Māl.

Collyrium, which is applied to the eyes, not only adds to the beauty of a bride's face, but is also auspicious –

तस्याः सुजातोत्पलपत्रकान्ते प्रसाधिकाभिर्नयने निरीक्ष्य।
न चक्षुषोः कान्तिविशेषबुद्ध्या कालाञ्जनं मङ्गलमित्युपात्तम्॥ (Kum.VII.20)

Wet yellow orpiment and red arsenic are considered to be auspicious in a marriage rite and an auspicious *tilaka* mark is made by it on the bride's forehead –

अथाङ्गुलिभ्यां हरितालमाद्रं माङ्गल्यमादाय मनःशिलाञ्च ।
कर्णावसक्तामलदन्तपत्रं माता तदीयं मुखमुन्नमय्य॥
उमास्तनोद्धेदमनु प्रवृद्धो मनोरथोयः प्रथमं बभूव।
तमेव मेना दुहितुःकथंचिद्विवाहदीक्षातिलकं चकार॥ (Kum.VII. 23-24)

Mṛgarocanā (yellow orpiment), holy dust and tender '*durva*' grass are also considered to be auspicious. Anasūyā gets ready the auspicious cosmetics for the send-off of Śakuntalā.

It is observed that auspicious rites are performed at the birth of a child (Raghu. X.77). At a marriage ceremony, the hands of the bride adorn the neck of the bridegroom with a garland which is wreathed with auspicious flowers (Raghu. VI.83-84). Auspicious decorations await a son-in-law when he enters his father-in-law's mansion for the first time after marriage (Raghu. VII.16).

Awakening at dawn by listening to the charming and auspicious panegyrics of bards, songs of birds, sound of musical instruments is believed to be auspicious.⁶

The company of an ascetic is also believed as auspicious. Dhāriṇī, the chief queen appears as if adorned with auspiciousness in the company of Parivrājikā, an ascetic.

Curse - (Śāpa)

Curses are given in a fit of anger or for non-accomplishment of the due duties, or for failing in giving due respect, etc.

It is considered to be the moral duty of everybody, especially of a resident of the hermitage to honor every visitor and more so if he is a sage. The disregard paid to a sage on his visit to the āśrama by Śakuntalā since she is lost in thoughts about the king, as observed, results in a curse (Abhi.IV.1). Here the example is of a sage (Durvāsas) cursing a common man (Śakuntalā).

The celestial damsel Urvaśī too, is cursed by Bharata, the preceptor, on transgressing his instructions. This is an example of a sage cursing a celestial being or semi-divine being.

Priyamvada, a *gandharva* is transformed into an elephant by Mataṅga's curse. This is also an example of a curse by a sage to celestial being (Raghu.V.53). The curse is given by the master to the servant even among semi-divine beings as Kubera curses his *anucara yakṣa* (Megh. Purva. I).

It is observed that curse is also given by common man to common man, of which the curse to king Daśaratha given by the old parents of Śrāvaṇa, is an example (Raghu.IX.78).

Rāvaṇa fettered by a curse pronounced by Nalakubera when he violates Rambhā when she is going to the former, is an example of a curse given by a deity to a demon (Raghu.X.47).

The curse given by the holy cow Surabhī to king Dilīpa that he has disregarded her in a hurry to meet his queen, so, he will be void of children until he propitiates her own offspring, is an example of a curse given by celestial holy (semi-divine) animal to a human (Raghu.I.77).

The concept of *uḥśāpa* is believed in this period too. Indumatī, the queen of Aja, originally an *apsaras*, is born as human due to curse and is able to return to heaven due to removal of curse by the *uḥśāpa*.

Hermitage - (Āśrama)

Detailed descriptions of a hermitage are given in Raghu., Kum. and Abhi. Hermitages are set up in the forests away from the city crowds. The hermitages are taken care of by sages who perform penances there. The sages also bring-up the children who are left with them for acquiring knowledge in the *śāstra*-s. The common people as well as kings come to stay in the *āśrama* after completing their duties as house-holders as per the

four-fold *āśrama*-system (Abhi.IV.20). Even when the kings visit the *āśrama*, they keep a scanty retinue, least they disturb the inmates of the hermitage.

The king is not supposed to collect taxes from the hermitages, for it is believed that the hermits give one-sixth portion of their merit to the king as the payment of tax (Abhi.II.13). Any person who wishes to seek rest and solace can visit the hermitage. It is observed that a king would rest in a hermitage when he would have set out on a hunt as observed in the 1st act of Abhi. People living in hermitages lead a simple life and are unaware of feelings of sexual love. So, Śakuntalā is surprised when she becomes susceptible of such feeling in her heart which is inconsistent with a penance grove.

The people brought-up in a hermitage are so simple that they are acquainted neither with artificial ornamentation nor with deceit.

The hermits wear bark garments have the hair matted on the top of the head, discard all luxuries and ornaments and possess a waist-band of *muñja* grass and a rosary (Kum.V.8,10-12). The daily routine of the hermits includes collecting sacred wood, sacred grass, fruits etc., offering oblations into the sacred fire, offering rice-grains (*nivāra*) to birds & insects, to fondle cubs of deer and other animals, to water trees, etc.

It is observed that hermitages give refuge to anyone in need. Therefore, a certain *yakṣa* spends the period of one year of his curse in the *āśrama* –

यक्षश्चक्रे जनकतनया स्नानपुण्योकदेषु।
स्निग्धच्छाया तरिषु वसतिं रामगिर्याश्रमेषु॥ (Megh.Pūrva. 1)

A hermitage becomes a support to a destitute like Sītā. Vālmīki tells her to dwell secure in his penance. Such hermitages also support the performance of the *saṁskāra*-s for a child of the refugee (Raghu.XIV.51).

Caste-system – (Varṇavyavasthā)

If a man of a lower caste marries a woman of a higher caste then on this same account all bonds of propriety indicated by the scriptures would be broken down. Hence a *kṣatriya* cannot marry a *brāhmaṇa* woman. So when Duśyanta is attracted towards Śakuntalā he wonders whether he will be able to marry her (Abhi.I.20).

A human belongs to a particular *varṇa* by birth. The people like fishermen belong to lower *varṇa*. The people belonging to higher *varṇa*-s generally condemn the acts and jobs of one belonging to lower *varṇa*; but still the latter continues to do the activities prescribed for him.

Respecting elders - (Gurujana-gaurava)

All elders including parents, preceptors, relatives, friends, ascetics, etc. are duly respected as observed. The elders in turn shower blessings on them suited to the occasion.

It is observed that kings too render their due respect to ascetics and sages.

It is a practice that a younger brother neither marries before the elder brother nor does he accept the throne. Bharata refuses to accept the throne. By accepting the realm before his elder brother has claimed it, he condemns himself as one who has married before his elder brother is wed (Raghu.XII.16).

The command of the elders must not be questioned-

स शुश्रुवान्मातरि भार्गवेण पितुर्नियोगात्प्रहृतं द्विषद्वत्।
प्रत्यग्रहीदग्रजशासनं तदाज्ञा गुरुणां ह्यविचारणीया॥ (Raghu.XIV.46)

Service to the brāhmaṇa - (Brāhmaṇa-sevā)

The *brāhmaṇa*-s are a preferential class of people. They have knowledge of the Vedic lore and can execute any sacrifice or ritual as per Vedic instructions. To enable them to be in the profession so that rites can be effectively carried out, they are offered donations and gifts for their services rendered. Since their words tend to be true, it is feared by the common man that if they are not pleased, they will utter a curse which will harm them. Due to this threat too, perhaps they are offered donations.

It is a practice that the first time an instruction is exhibited, a complimentary worship must be first offered to a *brāhmaṇa*.

It is believed that *brāhmaṇa*'s words never fail. It is a practice to give *dakṣiṇā* or donations daily to the *brāhmaṇa*-s who have mastered the Vedic lore. The royal classes too revere the *brāhmaṇa*-s and offer them donations to ward off evils.¹²⁹

A *brāhmaṇa* is believed to appear to be cruel when killing a sacrificial victim but actually he is tender with mercy (Abhi.VI.1).

King Raghu honors the desire of a *brāhmaṇa* pupil Kautsa who came to seek his teacher's fees after his Viśvajita sacrifice, though he does not possess any wealth as described in the fifth canto of Raghu. Rāma tells Bhārgava that he cannot smite him mercilessly since he is a *brāhmaṇa* (Raghu.XI.84).

Conclusion: Many social organizations are active about creating awareness on the rights of the people. Along with rights, duties are also important. Stressing on duties of others may lead to unpopularity. But it will lead to prosperity of the society. So great authors have made this as a central theme of their works. Kalidasa has been universally acknowledged as the highest star in the firmament of Indian poetry. Tenderness in the expression of feeling and richness of creative fancy has assigned to him a lofty place among the poets of all nations.

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