

## Laughter in the Time of Misery: Political Criticism in an Early Modern Sanskrit Poem

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It is often held that India had no tradition of political criticism taking the king and his actions to task. What she was used to were the innumerable panegyrics starting from hero-lauds such as the *gāthā-nāraśamsis* in the Vedic literature and the *araśar-vālttus* of early Tamil songs and developing through the *praśastis* in the medieval period. This absence of any critical check, among other things, allowed kings to exercise unbridled power; nor was there any hereditary nobility that could offer any restraint on the despotic ways of the ruler. What western political thinkers saw in pre-modern India was this kind of a polity and a social form suited to it and they called it Oriental Despotism. Criticism of any variety was impossible in such a political atmosphere. Here were a set of emasculated eminences who took all the atrocities of the state (read “king”) lying down without so much as opening their mouth against them. Although such an argument was handy for the British colonial masters, it is opposed to evidence. The *narmasaciva* envisaged by the *Dharmśāstras*, the *vidūṣakas* in the plays and so on discharged this duty very effectively. Disguised criticisms of the *anyāpadeśa* type and even more explicit ones are available in Sanskrit and other Indian languages. It is too early for at least people of Kerala to forget how the *Cākyārs* almost terrorized rulers in their *kūttu* and *kūṭiyāṭṭam* performances. *Mahiśasatakam*, a hundred verses in praise of a buffalo, which I presume to introduce here, has to be seen as an example of such political criticism.<sup>1</sup>

The author of this work, Vāñcheśvara Dikṣita *alias* Kuṭṭikavi, lived in Tañjāvūr in the eighteenth century. The circumstances leading to the composition of this work are explained by the poet’s namesake and great-grandson thus:

The banks of Kāveri shine with a large number of scholars, with temples of Śiva and Viṣṇu. The matchless city of Tañjāvūr is situated there, the capital from where kings of the Bhosale line ruled. Vāñcheśvara, of the line of their ministers and an intellectual who had seen the other side of

Vedas and Vedāṅgas, used to lead the rulers along the path of justice from time to time. Once the boyish king got into the company of wicked friends and refused to listen to good counsel. In order to bring the king back from their company and lead him along the right path, he composed [verses] in praise of a buffalo and cleansed the intellect of the king of blemishes.<sup>2</sup>

However, the poet himself has a considerably different version in the text. He says that he retired to his village with these thoughts: “Where are the kings of yore, verily life-saving elixir to the hosts of scholars who approached them, and where are these vulgar urchins who look upon knowledge as so much of poison? What shall I do? O mother Agriculture, protector of the worlds, I seek refuge in thee”. (v. 3) Recognising that “he who protects you is your lord” (v. 9), he composed a hundred verses in praise of his lord, the buffalo. He makes it clear in the very beginning that it is not for the merit of the object, a lowly animal, that he takes up the project of composing a hundred verses in its praise; it is to denigrate those agents of the state who are intent on harassing him and punish them by the rod of speech (v. 10). What follows is merciless rebuke of the king and his officers. It is far from the story of reforming the king with a song, as it were, as the commentator will have us believe. A little digression on the historical background of the poet and the poem will be in place here, so that both can be placed in better perspective.

Tañjāvūr, formerly the capital city of the Coḷas, was a major cultural centre of South India. That region came under the empire of Vijayanagara after the decline of the Coḷas. Like other parts of the empire, lords known as Nāyakas had ruled over Tañjāvūr. When the Vijayanagara Empire declined in the seventeenth century, these Nāyakas became independent rulers of the respective regions. Thus Tañjāvūr, like Madurai or Bidnur or Gingee, became an independent kingdom. Although the political power that the Nāyakas wielded had no comparison with

that of the Coḷas, the cultural activities inaugurated by the Coḷas continued in Tañjāvūr even under the Nāyakas. The ancestors of our poet were advisors of the Nāyakas of Tañjāvūr.

They came from Karnataka. The commentator describes his great-grandfather, the poet, as *Kannaṭṭijātāya*, “of Kannada extraction”. This family seems to have been closely related to the *ṣaīkarācāryas* of Śṛṅgeri. The relations between that *maṭha* and Vijayanagara Empire are well known. Govinda Dīkṣita, a great scholar from this family, was a good friend of Cevvappa Nāyaka, an associate of Emperor Acyuta Rāya of Vijayanagara. When Cevvappa Nāyaka married the sister-in-law of Acyuta Rāya, he got the *nāyakattanam* (“nāyakadom”) of Tañjāvūr region as dowry. Govinda Dīkṣita accompanied Cevvappa Nāyaka to Tañjāvūr. We have some information regarding the scholarly activities of members of this line of stalwarts.<sup>3</sup> A *mahākāvya* called *Harivamśāsāracarita* summarizing the *Mahābhārata*, a commentary of the *Sundarakāṇḍā* of *Rāmāyaṇa* and a treatise on music called *Sanṅītasudhānidhi* are attributed to Govinda Dākṣita. It is said that it was he who introduced the music of Vijayanagara to the court of Tañjāvūr, one reason by which that music came to be known as “Carnatic Music”. He also composed a treatise called *Ṣaḍḍarśana* in the field of *mīmāṃsā*. He is said to have organized a grand debate on the *advaita* of Śaṅkara, the *dvaita* of Madhva and the *viśiṣṭādvaita* of Rāmānuja in the court of Tañjāvūr, with none other than Appayya Dīkṣita, Vijayīndra Tīrtha and Tātācārya representing these schools respectively. Yajña Nārāyaṇa Dākṣita and Veṅkaṭa Makhin, both sons of Govinda Dākṣita, were reputed for their scholarship and poetic abilities. The former was the poet laureate of the Nāyakas of Tañjāvūr. He composed a *mahākāvya* called *Raḡhunāthabhūpavijaya* and a play called *Raḡhunāthavilāsa*, both on his patron, Raḡhunātha Nāyaka of Tañjāvūr. In another work called *Alaṅkāratnākara*, he exemplifies all major figures of speech in Sanskrit by means of verses in praise of his patron. A few verses about him, composed by the celebrated Nārāyaṇa Bhaṭṭa of Melputtūr from Kerala, have come to light.<sup>4</sup> In fact, the Bhaṭṭa was all praise for scholars from the Coḷa country. Veṅkaṭeśvara Dīkṣita or Veṅkaṭa Makhin, the younger brother of Yajña Nārāyaṇa Dīkṣita, was another great scholar and musicologist. He was courtier of Raḡhunātha Nāyaka as well as Vīrarāghava Nāyaka, the last of the Tañjāvūr Nāyakas.

Ekoji, brother of the Maratta Chatrapati Śivaji, captured Tañjāvūr from the Nāyakas and established the rule of the Bhosales there. Although Venkaji had ruled for a short while following the death of Ekoji in 1683, Śahaji ascended the throne in 1687 after the death of the former. Veṅkaṭa Makhin seems to have joined

the Maratta court. The Bhosales were not far behind the Nāyakas in the patronage of art and culture, including scholarship in Sanskrit. Śahaji, who ruled till 1710, was a scholar in his own right. He endowed an *agrahāra* called Śaharājendrapura in Tiruviśanallūr near Kumbhakonam for Brāhmaṇas. Govinda Dīkṣita’s successors seem to have got land in it. There is a beautiful couplet that our poet has composed about this *agrahāra*:

Śrīśaharājendrapure  
Śrīśaharājendraviṣṭapaili sadṛṣe |

(In Śrīśaharājendrapura, comparable to the heaven of Śrīśa [Viṣṇu], Hara [Śiva], Aja [Brahmā] and Indra.)

For the deft use of paronomasia, our poet earned the title of *Śleṣacakraavartin*. He had shown his intelligence and poetic abilities even as a young boy. It is said that he accompanied king Śahaji to the Mīnākṣī temple in Madurai, where the king composed the following couplet *ex tempore* on the goddess:

puri madhuram giri madhuram  
garimadhurandharanitambabhārādhyam |  
sthūlakucam nīlakacam  
bālakalācandrāṅkitam tejah ||

When the king paused, young Vāñcheśvara mused:

hydi tarasā viditarasā  
taditarasāhityavān na me lagati |  
kaviloke na viloke  
bhuvī lokeśasya śāhajerupamā ||

Amazed, the king conferred on the poet the title “Kuṭṭikavi”, meaning “Boy Poet”, also suggesting affection.<sup>5</sup> He has written a couple of other *śatakas* or centuries such as *Dhāṭiśataka* and *Āśīrvādaśataka*, which I have not been able to lay my hands on. Like his predecessors, he too showed unswerving loyalty to royalty. Śahaji showed great respect for him in return. However, things were not quite the same always. Śarabhoji and Tulalāji, who succeeded Śahaji, were weak rulers. Although the latter did patronize literature and music to some extent, he was not very successful. He had five sons, two born outside marriage. Pratāpasimha, one of the latter, captured power after deposing Sayyaji. He is described as “the wily Tanjorean” in contemporary English documents. The interest he showed in wine and women was notorious.<sup>6</sup> While the walls of the *sattras* (wayside inns) built by Śarabhoji and others are adorned with scenes from the *Mahābhārata*, similar structures sponsored by Pratāpasimha show scenes of *maithuna* (copulation)!

An undesirable ruler was not the only curse of Tañjāvūr in the latter half of the eighteenth century.

A famine struck the area in 1730. The fertile valley of Kaveri witnessed abject poverty. Contemporary British documents testify to the export of a large number of slaves from Nagapattinam. The British also led a military expedition against Pratāpasimha. The rivalries between the English and the French and the way in which the British threw in their lot in favour of the Nawab of Carnatic led to what are known as the Carnatic Wars, the details of which are too well known to be recounted here. These wars had a bad effect on the economy of the Kaveri valley in ways more than one. The depredations of Hyder Ali, destroying the embankments for irrigation and indulging in man-hunting in various ways, laid the countryside waste. As life became unbearable, all sorts of evils swallowed the land.

The conditions of that region are described vividly by Christian Frederic Schwartz, a German Pietist missionary who operated in Tañjāvūr in this period. The testimony of Schwartz is acceptable as his record is otherwise impeccable. He speaks about the miserable conditions of the region around Tañjāvūr in the wake of the terrible wars from the middle of the eighteenth century. Looting, arson, rape and other atrocities, which are essential items of any war, made life nearly impossible. The conversion of large numbers to swell the ranks of the “disciple regiments” by the Mysorean conqueror and the destruction of irrigation canals and embankments are pointed out as other factors responsible for the terrible conditions of life. Schwartz writes:

When it is considered that Hyder Ali has carried off so many thousands of people, and that many thousands have died of war, it is not at all surprising to find not only empty houses, but desolate villages – a mournful spectacle indeed... We have suffered exceedingly in this fortress from hunger and misery. When passing through the streets early in the morning, the dead were lying in heaps on dunghills... such distress I never before witnessed, and God grant I never may again.<sup>7</sup>

Schwartz has admitted that his congregation had indeed swollen, but by people who were not so much convinced of the superiority of the Gospel as driven by hunger! He says that it was difficult to teach the natives even the rudiments of a foreign faith with their mental powers diminished by famine.

Contagious diseases added to the problems. The Christian missionaries tell us about a terrible dysentery that visited the regions of Tranquebar. This and other forms of pestilence afflicted Tiruchchirāpalli, Tañjāvūr and the neighbouring regions in this period.<sup>8</sup> Misrule, war, diseases, British-French-Danish intrigues, the cruelties of the Nawab, attempts at Christian proselytisation as well as persecution of Christians – it was when Tañjāvūr had been checkmated by all these forces that *Mahiṣaśatakam* had its origin. The context in which the poet took

to agriculture is important: “It is well-known that agriculture forestalls famine. And, Manu too has allowed agriculture and cattle-keeping for Brāhmaṇas in times of distress. When kings are greedy and times are troubled by famine, let me take to agriculture for a living. What is wrong with that?” (v. 5) The way in which the expression *durbhikṣa* (“famine”, “distress”) is repeated in the poem is significant. The poet shows how scared he is of war – *bibhemyāhavāt* (v. 6). In an advice that he gives scholars, he shows how fever and other diseases had affected the country of the Coḷas: “Dear scholar, don’t do anything impudent. Listen to me: I shall tell you what is best for you. My friend, don’t leave Lord Buffalo, the true friend of men who grants wishes, and go to the town of Śrīraṅga [“the Theatre of Prosperity”], the house of fever, where prosperity is distant; and what you have at hand is the sound of the bell round the neck of the buffalo whom the God of Death rides” (v. 8).

This poem shows how a concerned intellectual responded to the terrible times of distress in which he lived. Perhaps a comparison is in place. Tyāgarāja, the reputed musician, had lived in the same place almost during the same period. When life became nearly impossible on account of war, pestilence, famine and poverty, Tyāgarāja took it as the inevitable manifestation of the Kali Age, the darkest possible period. The only redemption that he saw was through the mercy of god. His songs are the expression of an innocent mind that sincerely believed that devotion – undiluted devotion – was the only panacea for this distress. William Jackson has shown that although it will not be possible to take up any one of his compositions and show that it can be read against the background of any particular event;<sup>9</sup> but one can clearly hear a reaction to the political and social decadence as well as economic misery of his times reverberating in them. When he was ordered to go and sing in the royal court, he politely refused saying that his songs were reserved for the divine. This was the courage that devotion gave him. In the situation of helplessness, he cried out to god. But our poet chose to laugh, and laugh aloud somewhat cruelly. The echo of this laughter reaches and shakes many quarters. An examination of its contents will show how, going beyond frivolous cynicism, there is serious political and social criticism, expressing protest against the establishment and the order of things.

The first part of the poem consists of sharp criticism of the king and his officers, after dilating on the meaningless of serving them in a world where scholars and scholarship have lost their relevance. Then there is a detailed section where the king and his officers are equated with the buffalo, and *vice versa*. In the third and final part is social protest, clothed in not-so-subtle sarcasm. In the poet’s own words, what he does is to punish the king and the

officers of the state with the rod of speech. While the kings and ministers of old had been verily the nectar of longevity for the scholars who depended on them, the present ones are vulgar urchins, for whom knowledge is but poison. It is surprising that people still desire to go through the hell of waiting at the outer doors of the royal palace even after seeing the advantages of agriculture, hailed by both theory and practice. From the description of the bad fate of two scholars, Śrīdhara and Ambu Dīkṣita, Pierre-Sylvain Filliozat thinks that the historicity of the work is likely. Be that as it may, the poet's own experience is enough to show the negative attitude of the times towards scholarship: the renowned Kuṭṭikavi is sleeping at the doorsteps of evil lords! It is not just the capital of one's own country: even towns like Śrīraṅgam are not any better.

The poet makes it clear that he is praising the buffalo just to pour scorn on the lords. He is putting his gifted tongue to good use just to disparage the lords who, not knowing his greatness, are engaged in harassing him. He is doing it by paying obeisance to his Royal Highness, the buffalo. He is running down on the wicked officers who persecute him and punishing them with the rod of speech for his anger towards them. If those kings become conscious of their drawbacks, he will be happy. The king is a fool; and his ministers are more so. Those who are around them are so many traitors who plunder everything. Even if you want to practice agriculture, O buffalo, don't do it in the Coḷa country: I was able to save my loincloth; you do not have even that!

Filliozat seems to think that the denunciation and rebuke in this poem are directed more to the ministers, officers and other hangers-on of the king than to the king himself. He thinks that the story of the origin of the poem as given in the prologue of the commentary is probable.<sup>10</sup> Filliozat translates *rājā mugdhamatiḥ* in verse 12 as "the king is innocent in spirit" ("*le roi est innocent d'esprit*") and concedes only that a direct criticism of the courtiers is an indirect criticism of the king. Perhaps he is carried away by the statement in the *prastāvanā* of the Srirangam edition and the prologue of the commentary by the great-grandson of the poet himself. The glosses of the great-grandson on certain verses (vv. 1, 2, 11, 12, etc.) are keen to present the poet as very loyal to the king and such criticism as there are as directed against the hangers on. See, for instance, the gloss on v.11, which insists that "by this [verse] it is suggested that despite the primacy of the king, the officers around him are scoundrels; so also, this work is not rebuking the king but only giving him good counsel".<sup>11</sup> Further, taking the last two verses which to my mind are interpolations, seriously too, may have led Filliozat to this position.<sup>12</sup> The subservience shown in these two verses does not gel with the strong

criticism and severe sarcasm of the body of the text. It is likely that some pliant courtier interpolated these two verses at the end in order to please the king. Alternatively, even if the poet himself added them later on in order to escape punishment or so, still they have to be treated as interpolations – interpolation *is* interpolation, whether by the poet himself or by somebody else. Moreover, the 100<sup>th</sup> verse of the work,<sup>13</sup> where the poet sees himself as the gratified Rāma who has acquired Sītā (Rāma's wife in one register and furrow in the other), after crossing the ocean of distress with the help of the buffalo in whom the presence of all the major monkeys is attributed by a deft use of *śleṣa*-paronomasia, crowns the project. Anything after that is simply improper. Hence I take the last two verses as interpolations, with no major harm to the poem.

Be that as it may, the poet shows no mercy in ridiculing and criticizing the king. He wastes no time and begins the exercise in the third verse itself. After praising the kings of yesteryears such as Nānāji, Śahaji and their ministers such as Candrabhānu and Ānandarāya, those of the present are described as "vulgar urchins" (*vr̥ṣaḷāsabhyāḥ*). To be waiting upon the kings at their outer gates is the worst of hells (v. 4). Kings are greedy (v. 5). Kings, who cannot appreciate the poet's greatness, are engaged in persecuting him (v. 6). The poet was composing the poem not so much for the greatness of the subject, a lowly animal, as for punishing the accursed officers and their lords who are engaged in harassing him (v. 10). He hopes that kings who can appreciate quality, hearing this essay on buffalo, learns about their own bad qualities from the suggestions in the speech of the poet. He wishes they start protecting their subjects according to law and earns the right to the power they wield (v. 11). The king is stupid (v. 12). The buffalo will be an illustrious member of the royal court; he does not have to worry that he does not have the necessary learning and expertise for it – those who are already there are even greater fools; and he would be verily *Vācaspati* ("Lord of Eloquence") among them (v. 22). The poet's words are sullied because he had earlier used them to praise the kings, mad with wealth and full of other vices (v. 26). Enough of these kings, who are totally lawless (v. 29). My ears are agitated by the cruel words, devoid of any compassion, of the evil kings who grow increasingly conceited every day; the buffalo's lowing is verily nectar to them (v. 31). The shabby kings are stupid and detestable; their face is fearsome for the heat generated by wealth. There is no use waiting at their courtyard (v. 32). It is hazardous to stay in the courtyard of the royal palace, dark with the smoke issuing from the long cigars in the hands of the conceited soldiers used to speaking only foul language and stinking of their spittle; the buffalo protects you from that hazard (v. 38). Kings are too stupid to tell between what to do and what

not because they are blinded by the darkness of wealth; let them stay where they are (v. 50). These kings are murderously cruel like hunters. (v. 51).

It is not just on the basis of so many verses where the king is directly scolded that this work appears as strong political criticism aimed at the king himself. There are a number of verses where the king is equated with a buffalo and the buffalo is addressed as king. It will be agreed that this is not exactly panegyric. There are two ways in which the buffalo is equated with the king: a) by direct addresses and b) by attributing royal features in the buffalo. The buffalo is addressed in the following ways:

*mahiṣādhirāja* (vv. 26, 30, 33, 54, 57, 64, 66, 79, 83); *sairibhapati* (vv. 8, 27, 35, 38, 49, 84); *mahiṣendra* (vv. 17, 34, 39, 52, 53, 61, 67, 70); *kāsarapati* (vv. 21, 51, 58, 78, 99); *kāsareśvara* (vv. 41, 72, 80, 86, 97); *kāsaendra* (vv. 37, 40, 81); *kāsarasāvabhūma* (vv. 29, 56); *mahiṣakṣitīśvara* (vv. 69, 92); *kāsarakṣmāpati* (vv. 90, 98); *lulāyārāja* (vv. 48, 60); *mahāsairibha* (vv. 71, 96); *sairibharājārāja* (v. 20); *śrīkāsarādhiśvara* (v. 62); *sairibhamaṇḍaleśvara* (v. 46); *sairibhamaṇḍalendra* (v. 68); *kāsaramaṇḍaleśvara* (v. 63); *mahiṣeśvara* (v. 7); *rājaśrīmahīṣa* (v. 9); *mahiṣābhikhyā prabhu* (v. 23); *mahiṣāvātamsa* (v. 45); *lulāyāprabhu* (v. 6); *mahiṣādhiśa* (v. 77); *lulāyādhiśa* (v. 95).

At another level, all attributes of royalty are seen in the buffalo. He who protects people is himself the king. If a king is a king only after he is duly anointed, O, buffalo, please come to the pond. I shall pour pitchers of water on your head (v. 50). The next two verses end with the refrain, "you alone are our king!"<sup>14</sup> Thus, seen in any which way you look at, the attributes of royalty are unmistakably present in the buffalo.

It does not end there. If the poet had to wait upon wicked kings, it was because he refused to follow Lord Buffalo (v. 7). His guardian is now His Royal Highness, the Buffalo (v. 9). I shall consider the buffalo, who protects people with grain and [other forms of] wealth, as the one who is worthy of respect; what are other kings good for? (v. 16) O, Buffalo, the overlord, poverty does not occur even in dreams to those who seek refuge in you. Be it well for you, the friend of the scores of poor people (v. 30). Scholars do not unfortunately go to my king, the buffalo, who grants all wishes (v. 32). Cattle-shed is verily a palace for the buffalo and dung, musk; the dust on the floor is fresh silk cloth (v. 33). The buffalo looks like one who is initiated to perform the *aśvamedha* (v. 58). When kings of *purāṇic* fame such as Bhīṣma (the terrible), Anala (one who is never satisfied), Nṛga (approachable to men), Hrasvaroma (with short hair), Bharata (weighty), Pṛthu (with a huge body), Marutta (faster than wind) are present in the buffalo, the poet would not go to the wicked kings any more (v. 82). In another verse which uses the *double entendre* in an equally brilliant way, the poet sees in the

buffalo the presence all major kings of the *Mahābhārata* fame (v. 85).

The political criticism contained in the poem does not end with seeing a buffalo in the king and the king in a buffalo. The poet does not spare a chance to scold the agents of the king, both the bureaucrats and the lords. The reference to the "vulgar urchins who look upon knowledge as so much of poison" in the very third verse is as much to the ministers as to the king. Ministers of the king are traitors and are intent on stealing everything (v. 12). Wicked fellows amass grains and wealth by competing with one another. Then, pretending to be enterprising, they aspire for political power and, finally, by bribing those close to the king, appropriate everything by force. Death upon them (v. 13)! The poet says he took to agriculture as it was impossible to make a living through learning. When the crops become ripe, however, cheats of officers such as *subhedār*, *havalḍār*, *majumdār*, etc. mercilessly encircle the field. "Alas, what do I say?" (v. 15) Drunken with arrogance bred by prosperity, these corrupt followers of mammon get into the company of wicked friends and indulge in gluttony and sex (v. 16). These rich fellows are evil and drunk with the pride of wealth. They are greedy. They are mean whoresons. They always speak harsh words. It is better to look at the huge testicles of the buffalo than seeing their face; by doing so, one is assured of a sumptuous meal (v. 17)!

A few verses that follow are exclusively devoted to excoriate a category of officers known as the *subhedārs* who seem to have earned the special wrath of the poet. As is well known, the *subedār* was in charge of collection of revenue under the Marattas. It is natural that they were the object of hatred, not only because of the excessive extortions but also for the excesses they committed. The poet pulls no punch in rebuking them. Whatever the buffalo produces is taken away by the *subhedārs*: obviously, what parents produce is taken away by children, whether for love or by force (v. 18). By an expert use of paronomasia, the poet finds out similarities between the *subhedārs* and the buffalo and sees that they are his brothers. His only doubt is: are they elder or younger? (v. 19) The poet has been serving the buffalo long by giving him bundles of grass, washing him clean and massaging his body. Will he do a favour in return? Will he take the God of Death, riding on his back, to the *subhedārs* sooner? (v. 20) O buffalo, are you hungry? Go and eat those *subhedārs* whom we consider as so much of grass. How does it help the world if he eats the dry, innocent, hay everyday? (v. 21)

*Mahiṣāśatakam* is not just political criticism alone. Kuṭṭikavi exposes and laughs at the social and cultural decadence that had swallowed the country. We saw that the rulers of the day are described as "vulgar urchins who look upon knowledge as so much of poison". This

deterioration, which had affected knowledge, pains the poet. The statement that Śrīdhara had become an expert merchant of the commodity of knowledge and that the good food of Ambu Makhin had become gold itself shows how knowledge had become a saleable commodity (v. 7). He does not conceal his strong disapproval of it. Although he is pained about the way in which it has become difficult to make a living through learning, he expresses the pain clothed in cutting humour (v. 15). The poet's accusing finger points to other areas where society is decadent. He has only contempt, bordering on intolerance, for institutionalised religion. The meaninglessness of sacrificial rites, pilgrimage and various yogic practices is the subject of one verse (v. 36). The way in which Vedic scholars made a fetish of their expertise (v. 54), Madhvācārya (v. 55), Śrīvaiṣṇavas (v. 57), the ways of *yoga* (v. 56), the activities of a *yajamāna* in a sacrifice (v. 58) – all this is the subject of the poet's ridicule.

The expertise of the poet in various branches of knowledge is remarkable. He shows considerable awareness of agricultural practices. He is a keen observer of things around him as just one *svabhāvokti* will testify to.<sup>15</sup> His scholarship ranges from *kāmaśāstra* to *mīmāṃsā*, and includes subjects as varied as *tarka*, *vyākaraṇa*, *prosody*, *poetics*, *dharmasāstra*, *purāṇa*, *itihāsa* and so on. And he attributes the details of an expert in each one of these in the buffalo, with the help of his mastery of the *double entendre*. He is quite an Emperor of Paronomasia, *śleṣacakravartin*. Thus we have in the buffalo *brahman* (v.59), Indra (v. 60), *sālagrāma* (v. 61), the ocean (v. 63), the mountain (v. 81), Hanūmat (v. 64), Kārtavīrya Arjuna (v. 65), a poet (v. 66), a poem (v. 67), Bharatācārya (v. 68) eleven incarnations of Viṣṇu including the Buddha (vv. 69-79), Śiva (v. 80), kings of purāṇic fame (v. 82) Arjuna (v. 83), Karṇa (v.84), the *Mahābhārata* (v. 85), Droṇa (86), Laṅkālakṣmī (v. 87), Rāvaṇa (v. 88), a Muslim chief called Chanda Khan (v. 89), a grammarian (v.90), a logician (v. 91), a philosopher of the *mīmāṃsā* school (v. 92), a poetic treatise (v. 93), the nine *rasas* (v. 94), a *bon vivant* (v. 95), a womaniser (v. 96), Vāli (97), the guardians of directions (v. 98), the great gifts (*mahādānas*) (v. 99) and a contended Śrīrāma (v.100). All this is achieved by an expert use of *double entendre*. No amount of appreciation will be too much about this aspect of the literary ability of the poet. So also, in the field of aesthetics and rhetoric, the poet achieves great heights, particularly employing different figures of speech. These are largely in the form of suggestions as are references to points of grammar, prosody, poetics, philosophy, logic, *dharmasāstras*, *kāmaśāstra*, *Purāṇas* and so on. In fact, it will take a separate study to appreciate the literary and scholarly aspects of the poem.

My purpose here is to argue that this poem has to be seen primarily as expressing social and political protest.

At a time when corruption and debauchery had overtaken the rulers and their agents, when the countryside lay prostrate with war, famine and pestilence, when social and religious practices had become decadent, when foreign powers of different descriptions were making a bid to establish economic and political control, when foreign faiths were making inroads, the poet comes out strongly with his protest. What we find here is not one of those "weapons of the weak". In dealing with the intellectual history of the "early modern" period of Indian history, historians have not given sufficient attention to such reactions of the intellectuals of the likes of Vāñcheśvara Dikṣita. It is only after their work is appreciated that a fuller appreciation of how intellectuals reacted to changing times will be possible.

## Notes

1. I am extremely grateful to Pierre-Sylvain Filliozat for not only drawing my attention to this great work but also the many delightful hours and e-mail messages discussing it. I have used his Introduction to the French edition of the work in a big way, although I respectfully disagree with him on certain points of opinion and interpretation. His edition of the work is impeccable: *Mahīṣasatakam: Vāñcheśvarakavi-praṇītam, La Centurie de buffle de Kuṭṭikavi*, Edition et traduction par Pierre-Sylvain Filliozat, *Bulletin d'Études Indiennes*, N° 21.2, 2003 [hereafter MŚ], Association Française pour les Études Indiennes, Paris. Script: Nāgarī (and Roman for the French part). There are two earlier editions of it: a) *Mahīṣasatakam* by Kuṭṭikavi, resident of Śahajimahārājapura or Tiruviśanallūr in the district of Tanjore, with the commentary entitled *Śleṣārthacandrikā* of Vāñcheśvara, edited by Rāmākṛṣṇamācārya of Vaṅgipuram with the assistance of Mahāliṅgaśāstrin of Śahajimahārājapura, published by Raṅgācārya of Vaṅgipuram at Sarasvatīnilaya Press in 1875 samvat (AD 1932). Script: Telugu. b) *Mahīṣa Śatakam of Sri Vanchesvarakavi, with the commentary "Slesharthachandrika" of his great-grandson Sri Vanchesvara Yajva*, with Sanskrit Prastavana by K.S.Venkatarama Sastri and an English introduction by R. Krishnaswami Iyer M.A., B.L. Advocate, Tinnevely, edited by Gurubhaktasikhamani, Sastraprasarabhushana T.K.Balasubrahmanya Aiyar, B.A., Dharmadhikari, Sri Sankaragurukulam, Srirangam, 1946, IV, 8, 60 pages. Script: Nāgarī. I have subsequently brought out an edition with an Introduction and prose translation in English. *Śrī Vāñcheśvara Dikṣita's Mahīṣasatakam with the Commentary Śleṣārthacandrikā by Vāñcheśvara Yajvan, the Poet's Great-grandson*, edited, translated into English and introduced by Kesavan Veluthat, Mahatma Gandhi University, Kottayam, 2011.
2. See Prologue to the Commentary by Vāñcheśvara Yajvan, vv. 2-7.
3. The following details about the family are from MŚ, Introduction, pp. 3-5.

4. These verses are part of a letter that Melputtūr Nārāyaṇa Bhaṭṭa wrote to two great scholars from the Cōla country, Somadeva Dīkṣita and Yajñanārāyaṇa Dīkṣita, enclosing his *Apādīnāyapramāḍyasādhanam*. The ones referring to Yajñanārāyaḍa Dākṣita are:

*yuṣmadvaiduṣyadhātām khalu kaṇakabhuvī trāyat<sup>1</sup> bhogirājam  
vāḍāveḍāvidhātāmapi surasaritam kaikaṇāko jañāyām |  
ityevam yajñanārāyaḍavibudhamahādākṣitāḥ śatruvarga-  
trāḍāddevasya tasyāpyapaharata dhiyā sādhu sārvañāgarvam ||  
yuṣmādeva kṣitāśo vipulanayavidhistiñhate rājyadṣṇāu  
tiññadhve yāyameva prathitabudhajane sandihāne samete |  
yuṣmabhyam tiññhat<sup>1</sup> kastridaśagurusamāno'pi yuṣmādṣṅanyāḥ  
prajñālān yajñanārāyaḍavibudhamahādākṣitān vākṣt<sup>1</sup> kaḥ ||  
asvasthāḥ keraḍyāssvayamatimṣḍavastatra cāham viśeṣā-  
tsāve dārapracāre khalu śithiladhiyāḥ kim punardeśabhede |  
evam bhāvye'pi daivāt kuhaḍana samaye kalyatā kalyate cet  
prajñābdhān yajñanārāyaḍavibudhamahādākṣitānākṣitāhe ||*

The letter was discovered and published by Paḍōitar E.V. Raman Namboodiri in *Mathrubhumi Weekly*, February 5, 1939, and is reproduced by Vañakkumkār Rājarājavarma Rājā in his monumental *K<sup>1</sup>raḍyā Samskṣta Sāhitya Caritram*, revised second edition, Kaladi, 1997, vol III, p. 27.

5. These details are taken from *MŚ*, Introduction, pp. 9-11.  
6. For some of these details, William Jackson, *Tyāgarāja: Life and Lyrics*, Delhi, 1991, 2002, pp.76-91.  
7. Quoted in *Ibid.*, p. 87.  
8. *Ibid.*, *passim*.  
9. Jackson, *op. cit.*, pp. 90-93.  
10. *MŚ*, Introduction, pp. 11-12.  
11. "anena rājñāḥ prāmāḍikatve'pi tatparisaravartino'dhikāriḍāḥ khalā iti sācyate. tathā ca rājñō'pi hitopadeśarāpatvānnaitat prabandhe rājñō dveṣa iti bhāvāḥ." Commentary on v. 11.  
12. *śrāmadbhosalavamsādugdhajaladheḥ sampārōcandropamo yaḥ śasti kṣitimakṣati kṣitipatir mārtaḥ pratāpaḥ svayam |  
dārgḥāyurjitaśatrurātmapajayuto dharmī prajāragavān*

*ullāgho'stu sa nistulairnijasabhāstāraip kramāḍāgataip ||  
rājā dharmaparāḥ paramparadhṣtasnehāṣca tanmantriḍō  
rājanyatvanī vanāpakajānā ḍōhyā bhavantu kṣitau |  
puṣñāigāḥ paśavaścarantu bhajatām durbhikṣvartā layam  
vāñchānāthakaveḥ kṣtiśca kurutām nirmatsarāḍām mudam ||  
vv. 101-2*

13. *sugrāvo'si mahān gaj<sup>o</sup>'si vapuṣā nālāḥ pramāthī tathā  
dhāmraścāsi mahānubhāva mahiṣa tvam durmukhaḥ kesarī |  
ittham te satatam mahākapiśatākārasya sāhāyyataḥ  
sātām prāpya vilāghya dupkhaladham nandāmi rāmaḥ  
svayam || v. 100.*  
14. *bhāpo bhāpa itāva kim nvanugatā jātirghaṇatvādivad-  
bhāmāvasti ya eva rakṣati janān rāja sa eva svayam |  
kim bhāmāpatayaḥ śārāraḥ ime krārāḥ kirātā iva  
prāyaḥ sārvaajanāna kāsarapate rājā tvamevāsi naḥ ||  
sānandam mahiṣāśatam ramayase mārḍhābhikṣikto'nvaham  
tvam vālavayanāvadhātimasakṣt prāy<sup>o</sup>ḍa śṣiḡānvoitāḥ |  
kim ca svām prakṣtim na muñcasi tṣḍaprayam jagat paśyasi  
svasti śrī mahiṣendra te'stu niyatam rājā tvamevāsi naḥ ||  
vv. 51-2.*

See also the commentary on v. 52:

... rājakṣe: mahiṣāḍām kṣtābhikṣekāḍām strāḍām. 'kṣtābhikṣekā mahiṣā' ityamarāḥ. śate sahasre vā pariḡāḍite ramayase. antāppurastrīyaḥ yathā sambhogāḍinā tuṣyanti tathā kalāśastroktaparakāreḍa tāsām prātyatiśayam janayati. 'mārḍhābhikṣikto rājanyāḥ' ityamarāḥ. vālam cāmaram vyajanam tālavṣntādikam tayoravadhātīm. śṣiḡeḍa prabhutvenānvoitāḥ. 'śṣiḡam prabhutve' iti viśvaḥ. svām prakṣtim svakāyarājyaigam svāmyamātyaḍikam. 'rājyaigāni prakṣtayaḥ' ityamarāḥ. jagadbhuvanam. tṣḍaprayam tṣḍasādṣsam yathā bhavati tathā paśyati. janeṣvaiśvāryāḍyalpatv<sup>na</sup> tatra rājñāḥ tṣḍabuddhirbhavatātyarthāḥ.  
15. *kedāre mahiṣāmano jagṣhamāghrāyonnamayyānanam  
dantān kiñcidabhipradarśya vikṣtam kājan khuraiḥ kṣmām  
khanan |  
pratyagrāyitasāraḍāikuranibham yatkiñcidujjṣmbhayann-  
ānandam mahiṣeśa nirviśasi yat tadṣṣtunetrotsavaḥ || v. 39.*