

From fast to feast:  
The *aśana* discourse of the Vidūṣaka  
in Kerala's traditional Sanskrit theatre

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The Vidūṣaka, who appears as the court jester and companion of kings in Sanskrit drama, is always portrayed as fun loving and fond of food. The origin of the character is shrouded in mystery, and even the *Nāṭyaśāstra*, the seminal text of dramaturgy, which assumes him to be a necessary character in drama, is silent about the problem. Dramaturgical texts like the *Daśarūpaka* cursorily discuss his nature with the terse statement that the Vidūṣaka is a 'fun maker' (*hāsyakṛt*),<sup>1</sup> and even Dhanika, in his gloss, does not say much, except that the deformed nature, dress, and the like of the Vidūṣaka are assumed on the basis of the fact that he causes fun. However, Śāradātanaya's *Bhāvaprakāśana* mentions, among the Vidūṣaka's qualities of easy going hero (*dhīralalita*) represented by ministers and others, a fondness for food, both prescribed and prohibited.<sup>2</sup> In fact, there is no Vidūṣaka portrayed in Sanskrit drama as wanting in the passion for food. Even though there is no prescription available regarding his food and drinks in dramaturgical texts, almost all the playwrights have portrayed him as a glutton, who revels in all savoury dishes and, more importantly, dwells upon items of food whenever possible in his discourse.<sup>3</sup> Examples are galore; they include Vasantaka in Udayana plays such as Bhāsa's *Pratijñāyugandharāyaṇa*, as well as *Svapnavāsavadatta*, Harṣavardhana's *Ratnāvalī* and *Priyadarśikā*, Santuṣṭa in *Avimāra*, Maitreya in *Mṛcchakatikā*, Mādhavya in *Abhijñānaśākuntala*, Gautama in *Mālavikāgnimitra*, Māṇavaka in *Vikramorvaśīya*, as well as Ātreya in *Nāgānanda*. Apart from the fact that the Vidūṣaka is a food loving glutton and that his obsession with food is always a point of humour in classical Sanskrit drama, it can be seen that further elaborate references to food are meager therein. At the best, his cursory references to

1. *Daśarūpaka* II.7, see Malaviya 1979.

2. *Bhāvaprakāśana*, see Swami-Sastri 1968, 282.

3. Bhat 1959, 67.

kitchen matters provide some comic relief to the play, especially in his conversations with the love-obsessed heroes.

The Vidūṣaka has always been a prominent character in Kūṭiyāṭṭam, Kerala's traditional Sanskrit theatre, which is the only surviving traditional performance of ancient Sanskrit drama anywhere in the world. Of course, some of the plays traditionally staged in Kerala, such as Śaktibhadra's *Āścaryacūḍāmaṇi* and Bhāsa's *Abhiṣeka*, do not have the Vidūṣaka in their dramatic persona. The main Vidūṣaka characters seen in Kūṭiyāṭṭam presentations are Vasantaka in *Pratijñāyauḡandharāyaṇa* ascribed to Bhāsa, Śaṅḍilya in Bodhāyana's *Bhagavadajjuka*, Kauṇḍinya in *Subhadrādhanañjaya* and Pārāśarya in *Tapatīsaṃvaraṇa*, both by Kulaśekhara, and Ātreya in Harṣavardhana's *Nāgānanda*. One of the causes of his prominence is his freedom in using Malayalam, Kerala's regional language, in his discourse, in addition to Sanskrit and Prakrit, allowing him to establish an intimate rapport with the audience, which includes people who may not be scholars in Sanskrit and Prakrit. The Vidūṣaka actually bridges the gap between the play and the audience, by interpreting and elaborating the textual passages in the regional language and also by pretending that the audience actually belongs to the time/space framework of the play presented, often cracking jokes at their expense. As pointed out by Kunjunni Raja, he is a 'chartered libertine' as he has unlimited freedom to make fun of anybody present in the audience, irrespective of their rank and class. His torrential discourse lasts for hours and whenever he is present on the stage, even the hero and the other characters pale into insignificance. True to his role as a jester, he often sends the audience into peals of laughter with timely jokes, often at the expense of the hapless audience itself, which is supposed to have a grin and bear it attitude to his vagaries. In short, it can be stated that in his new avatar, the Vidūṣaka has become an institution by himself. Due to the inevitable structuring the character has undergone on the Kerala stage, his individuality often gets blurred, to such an extent that apart from the personal name the Vidūṣaka possesses in different dramas, there are not very many distinguishing features between one Vidūṣaka and another in the many extant presentations, and food discourse is one of the interesting features which stand out in his function.

It seems that the food discourse of the Vidūṣaka in the Malayalam language in its present form is a result of a long process of evolution, since many plays belonging to earlier times do not possess this feature. Two such instances are the *Bhagavadajjuka* and *Pratijñāyauḡandharāyaṇa*. In Bodhāyana's *Bhagavadajjuka*, ascribed to the third century AD<sup>4</sup>, featuring the exchange of the souls of a hermit and harlot and the ensuing comedy, the student Śaṅḍilya, who attends the hermit, describes himself as born in a clan of the twice born. However, he decides to convert to the Buddhist fold, on account of the utter lack of food in his abode and in the hope of getting a decent breakfast. But he soon

4. Warder 1974, 335.

becomes disillusioned as he realizes that the Buddhists take no food except for breakfast. In his Malayalam discourse elaborated as a part of his script, the Vidūṣaka uses the expletive ‘sons of the slaves’ (*cerumimakkal*) to describe them<sup>5</sup> and states that he had also hoped to have a solid supper, but that his hope had been belied. He exclaims:

Due to the grace of the supper  
Strength accrues the next day  
Hence supper should be eaten  
More diligently than breakfast.<sup>6</sup>

Hence he felt that they did not eat any food at all and he relinquishes his connection with the fold.

In the *Mantrāṅka* of *Pratijñāyugandharāyaṇa*, Vasantaka is disguised as a wandering Brahmin with a lock of hair, who holds a curved stick, wears a loin cloth, is smeared with holy ashes, bears a rag bag, and puts a garland made of conches around his neck. In his present form, he is engaged in the serious business of securing the freedom of his Lord, King Udayana, who has been imprisoned in Ujjain by Mahāsenā. Though he has no opportunity to revel in gastronomic pleasures in his present state, he uses a code language featuring food to attract the attention of Rumaṇvān and Yaugandharāyaṇa, his fellow ministers. He uses the word *modaka* (sweetmeat) to indicate his master, Udayana, the King of the Vatsas. Interestingly, the term *vatsa* is used even nowadays in Kerala to denote *modaka*, the sweetmeat made of rice, and there can be no other explanation for this, save the influence of the Vidūṣaka’s discourse.

These cursory references to food in the earlier plays are a far cry from the elaborate food discourse which we find in plays belonging to the later phase, such as the *Nāgānanda*, *Subhadrādhanarājya*, and *Tapatīsaṃvaraṇa*, which feature the three Vidūṣakas named Ātreya, Kauṇḍinya and Pārāśarya respectively. In all these plays, there are no food discourses as such to be found in the texts themselves, but when they are staged, the Vidūṣaka makes the elaborate discourse called *Puruṣārthakkūttu* as part of the auto-narration of the character’s previous history, technically known as *Nirvahaṇa*. In fact, although the plays, the characters, and their nature are all different, their improvised and out-of-text oral discourse is more or less the same in this auto-narration, and their identities are blurred. All the characters begin their narration at the outset with an opening passage in the text and, after the preliminary rituals, start with an account of the inevitability of past deeds (*karman*).

5. Pisharoti 2001, 105.

6. Krishnachandran 1994, 22.

The Vidūṣaka narrates how the villagers unanimously select him to be the person to serve the King and how he approaches the King. Asked as to why he has come, he says:

The leaves of the drumstick plant,  
Which were confined to the side dish  
Now wish to replace  
Even the main course of rice.<sup>7</sup>

The king really enjoys the Vidūṣaka's wit, through which he conveys the idea that he had no rice to eat in his house, and all that was available were some leaves of the drumstick plant. The king accepts him into his fold as the court jester.

In his succeeding narrative, the Vidūṣaka describes how he settles an imaginary dispute between two aristocratic Brahmins in what is technically called the 'Settling of Dispute' (*Vātu tīrkkal*), where he pleads with them to forget their silly differences and to work for the welfare of the village. He further remarks rather satirically that the four aims of life (*puruṣārthas*), consisting of *dharma*, *artha*, *kāma* and *mokṣa*, are difficult to realize in the modern age and, in their place, the Brahmins should regard eating, serving a king, the enjoyment of a courtesan, and cheating on her, as the four respective *puruṣārthas*.<sup>8</sup> The Vidūṣaka's ensuing discourse is known as *Puruṣārthakkūttu* and it is here that feasting becomes a prominent item. In presentation, one night is devoted by the Vidūṣaka to dilate on the nature of the typical feast. At the outset of the discourse, he invites all his friends and acquaintances for the event. The occasion is the first annual ceremony commemorating the demise of a prominent Brahmin.

As a prologue to his discourse, the Vidūṣaka narrates the story of Vaiśravaṇa, the god of wealth, who once audaciously invited Gaṇapati, Lord Śiva's son, to a feast at his home, since he found him ill fed by his parents and wanted to show off his wealth. Śiva decides to teach him a lesson and taps on his son's stomach, with the result that the already gluttonous Gaṇapati becomes mad with hunger and finishes off everything which is offered to him, including even pots and plates, and then, with his hunger unsatiated, turns his wrath on the hapless host. To cut a long story short, Śiva had to feed his son some holy ash to remove his insatiable hunger and to save a thoroughly chastened Vaiśravaṇa from him.

In his discourse, the Vidūṣaka compares rice, Kerala's staple diet, to a king: the king is always alert to the welfare of his subjects. He is loved by all and in-

7. Krishnachandran 1994, 51: *upadaṃśāpade tiṣṭhan purā yaḥ śīgrupallavaḥ / idānīm odanasyāpi dhuram udvoḍhum ihate //*.

8. *Ibid.*, 123: *āmantraṇaṃ brāhmaṇānāṃ hi dharmaḥ sevā rājñām arthamūlaṃ narāṇām / veśyāstrīṣu prāptir evātra kāmo bhuyas tāsāṃ vañcanaṃ mokṣahetuḥ //*.

visible to the wicked. He is agreeable to the feelings of the fourfold ministers. The rice is also indispensable for people's welfare. It is unavailable to the petty minded; it is suitable for the taste of fourfold accompaniments consisting of *erīśseri*, *puliśseri*, *madhurakkari*, and *upperi*. He further compares rice to a damsel. The melting butter added to the hot rice is her smile; the cooked aubergines are her lips, the sweet pudding her breasts; the curd made from buffalo milk is her hips and the plantain fruit her thighs.<sup>9</sup>

The Vidūṣaka refers to four hosts, viz. those who are first hospitable and subsequently hostile; hostile first and then hospitable; hostile throughout, and, finally, hospitable throughout, and he advises people to only visit the last type; the second type can be approached only in an emergency. The other two types are best avoided.<sup>10</sup>

The feast goers are described as marching to the house of the prospective host after a lot of misadventures, and the Vidūṣaka points out that ten *yojanas* (about a hundred miles) is no distance for a Brahmin who is eager to attend a feast, just as a hundred *yojanas* are no distance for a *sūdra* fleeing from a battlefield.<sup>11</sup> What follows is a description of a huge feast with all its details, which is more or less the description of an ideal, something like the fulfilment of a fantasy, with undertones satirizing the gluttonous habits of contemporary society. At times, the description is decidedly exaggerated. In this elaborate narration, erotic undertones are conspicuous in many places, when food items and even vegetables are compared to women. Generally, the tone and tenor are witty and gently sarcastic, especially when describing how the food lover behaves towards the food served at the feast, but there is also a sense of earnestness and enthusiasm in the description of food. On the whole, the discourse gives a vivid picture of an upper-caste, traditional vegetarian feast in the Kerala of pre-modern times, whose general structure survives to date.

As he describes the huge assemblage of people for the feast, the Vidūṣaka points out that crows, on hearing that food will be served to the twice born, also flock to the place, since they too are 'twice born'.<sup>12</sup> The first place the group visits is the huge kitchen, which consists of sheds filled with people carrying bunches of banana fruits on rods placed on their shoulders and baskets full of coconuts. There are also huge porcelain containers full of jaggery and oil, heaps of old rice, ash gourds, heaps of green gram, looking like the mountains of emerald struck unconscious by Indra,<sup>13</sup> plantains, pitchers of curd and buttermilk,

9. *Ibid.*, 51.

10. *Ibid.*, 193: *sarasavirasagehaṃ bhoktukāmo na gacched virasasarasagehaṃ kaṣṭapakṣe prayātu / virasavirasagehaṃ mā kṣudhartho 'pi gacchet sarasasarasagehaṃ yātu tāpopasāntyai //*.

11. *Ibid.*, 225: *bhoktukāmasya viprasya na dūraṃ daśayojanam / raṇabhītasya sūdrasya na dūraṃ śatayojanam //*.

12. *Ibid.*, 226: *samāgatānām akhiladvijānām mṛṣṭāśanaṃ syād iti kiṃvadamantīm / ākarṇya kākā dvijanāmayogān māse prayāntīva mahājanena //*.

13. *Ibid.*, 230.

pots, utensils, and the like. The rice heap, surrounded by ash gourds, is fancied as looking like the white coloured Mount Kailāsa surrounded by its ‘children’ (a possible allusion to small hillocks surrounding it), which has fled to the storehouse of the feast to escape the wrath of Indra, who in mythology appears as having cut down the wings of all mountains.<sup>14</sup> Heaps of cooked rice are piled up, along with heaps of coconut scrapings. People have already reserved their places for the feast, squatting on the ground in the hall. But, first of all, the visitors take a comfortable bath to be ready for the oncoming feast.

There are some norms to be followed if one is to enjoy a feast without disturbance, and the Vidūṣaka is happy to share his expertise. According to him, one should not sit near aristocratic Brahmins at the feast, since they drop items, wasting everything, and they tend to lean on their neighbour to rest. One should also avoid scholars who will engage in deep distracting discussions. One should not sit at the end of the row, as there is the chance that the items of food could be finished by the time the server reaches that place; nor should one sit at the corner, as there is every possibility that the server may miss him. And again, one should not sit in a dark room, in a place which is concealed and which is low deep.<sup>15</sup> According to the Vidūṣaka, to really enjoy a feast, one should sit in a comfortable place, on a smooth wooden plank with men of taste on either side.

The food is ideally served on a neat plantain leaf which has not been dirtied by crows. In the subsequent narration, the Vidūṣaka describes the turmoil of the feast from the point of view of a Brahmin guest called Mūssad. In his eagerness, Mūssad is described as demanding that leaves should be placed on all sides around him. The leaf is to be sprinkled with water and washed. Thereupon, clarified butter is to be served, followed by plantain fruits and jaggery. The Vidūṣaka portrays the nearly delirious ecstasy of the Brahmin guest when the rice is being served. He almost passes out from excitement, much to the amusement of the onlookers. The warm rice served is white like the flower of the medicinal plant called *tumba* (*Leuca indica*.) The gentleman demands clarified butter to be poured like a female elephant urinating (*hastinīmūtrapāta*),<sup>16</sup> followed by a handsome serving of lentils. Next arrive all kinds of chips roasted in ghee, made of banana, jackfruit, elephant yam, tuber, and catmint. The next items are sautéed vegetables consisting of bitter gourd drumstick leaves, *Cassia tora*, aubergines, bitter aubergines, plantain, and tender jackfruit. Typically, Kerala’s ethnic curries, such as *olan*, *eriséri*, and *paccaṭi*, made of ingredients such as curd, tamarind, and various vegetables are described with mouth watering details and also with reference to the method of their preparation very

14. *Ibid.*

15. *Ibid.*, 237: *yatrāḍhyāḥ yatra vidvāṃso yatra bhāṇḍāḥ pratiṣṭhītāḥ / tatra tatra tu na stheyam antaṃ koṇaṃ ca varjayet //*.

16. *Ibid.*, 243.

much as if in a cookbook. Then comes the turn of pickles, made of lemon, gooseberry, tender mango, and big mangoes. Also mentioned are items like sour curry (*puliśseri*), ginger-curd mixture (*iñcittair*), the last item being extolled as hot enough to chastise one's tongue in preparation for the sweet puddings which are to finish off the feast. Roasted plantain soaked in jaggery, plain sugar, and steamed banana fruits are the other items served afterwards, as a precursor to the grand finale consisting of various puddings, followed by roasted wafers called *papaḍs* (*pappaṭam*), big plantains, and *rasam*, the concoction made of pepper.

In Vidūṣaka's discourse, the puddings, called *pāyasam* and *prathamam* in contemporary Malayalam, are designated 'sweet curries' (*madhurakkari*) in accordance with the upper class dialect. Pride of place goes to the *aṭapathamam* made of steamed rice cake to which coconut milk, milk, jaggery, dry ginger, and cumin seed powder is added. The Vidūṣaka recounts that Brahmā, the creator god had created this delicacy for human beings, and when the gods became upset over this, he had to create nectar to please them. He points out that since even the gods yearn to become human beings just to taste this nectar, it is futile for human beings to desire godhead.<sup>17</sup> The other puddings to follow are made of ripe bananas, roasted green gram, jackfruit, and a variety of plantain called *poovan*. All this sweet fest is to be signed off with a huge dose of sour curry, which in its turn should be mellowed with the curry called *olan*, which consists of vegetables boiled in water. Then arrives the final crescendo for the whole feast with a pudding (*pāyasam*) made of rice, sugar, and milk. The Mūssad commissions the server not to be deterred by the signs he gives, which are not to be taken literally. The server should continue to serve pudding even if the eater makes a preventive sound or a preventive gesticulation with his hand, and even when he pretends that he is going to fold up the leaf. He should only stop when he roars like a lion.<sup>18</sup> The Mūssad then consumes a handful of rice with curd and water boiled with dried ginger which has several confectioneries added to it. He finds it difficult to stand up to wash his hands after this heavy feast. The tailpiece of the whole episode is that the pleased Mūssad pronounces his blessing for another feast to be held in this selfsame thatched shed constructed for the feast now. This new feast should solemnize another anniversary of a death, although, in his ecstasy, little does he realize that his poor host will be the casualty if this wish were to be fulfilled.

The elaborate discourse of feast is also seen with variations in many medieval treatises such as the *Campū* works and *Tullal* works in Malayalam. When we compare the representation of the Vidūṣaka from earlier Sanskrit plays with that of the Kūṭiyāṭṭam, the local colour is very clear, since all the items men-

17. *Ibid.*, 256.

18. *Ibid.*, 259: *he he śabde pradātavyaṃ dātavyaṃ hastavāraṇe / patrapravāraṇe deyaṃ na deyaṃ siṃhagarjane //*.

tioned in his narrative are typical Kerala dishes. It is also interesting to note that there is no reference whatsoever to non-vegetarian dishes in the discourse, although, as pointed out by Bhat, early Sanskrit drama suggests that meat-eating was not a taboo for the Vidūṣaka.<sup>19</sup>

19. Bhat 1959, 71-72.



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