

Social Beliefs And Customs Projected In The Sanskrit Novel Avināśi

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ABSTRACT: The literary pieces are just replication of experiences of writers. A story becomes dynamic in the background of a proper society where all the aspects are projected in an appropriate manner. In the novel Avināśi the author Biswanarayan Shastri tries his best to sketch an apt society of 7th century A.D. Assam. The Avināśi focuses on the love story between the hero and heroine viz. Bhāskaravarmā, the King of Prāgjyotiṣapura and Mādhavī, a devadāsī respectively. The story also partly deals with the political history of the kingdom of Bhāskaravarmā of 7th century Assam. So, the author gives emphasizes to portray all the customs and social beliefs which go with the story and circumstances. In this paper an endeavor is prepared to highlight all the social beliefs and customs noticed in the novel Avināśi.

KEY WORDS : Avināśi, Caitra-saṅkramaṇa , Aśokāṣṭamī, Devadāsī, Madanamahotsava, Prāgjyotiṣapura, Kāpālikas

Social beliefs differ from one society to other. Beliefs are the amalgamation of different religious issues, ideologies of various communities and of different practices prevail in a society. These beliefs of societies may sometimes appear as logical and sometimes they turn to be superstitious. In the novel Avināśi there are ample mentions of such social activities and practices connected to the time of medieval Assam. The very first scene of the novel appears as a river festival.ⁱ In the bank of the river Karatoyā people have gathered on the occasion of caitra-saṅkramaṇa.ⁱⁱ The people take bath in the river and eulogies the river as well. Some are seen to offer tilodakas towards the deities as well as to the forefathers with the sanctified water of the river Karatoyā. This practice can be taken as a positive local belief. In India the culture of taking bath in the holy rivers is very famous. Even in Assam the ablution in the Brahmaputra river during Aśokāṣṭamī is regarded as a sacred activity.ⁱⁱⁱ Next, one of the social slots projected in the novel Avināśi is the concept of temple dancers or devadāsī in the medieval Assam. Mādhavī – the heroine has been projected as the victim of this social superstition of devadāsī system. The practice of this uncultured devadāsī system where the girls of tendered age are selected for offering Lord Mahākāla, has been narrated in the novel with every pros and cons through the character of Mādhavī. Devasvāmī has fixed the daily

routine of Mādhavī's activities to achieve the position of main temple dancer.^{iv} The routine and activities to be followed by Mādhavī also projects some of the deep rooted social dogmas. The work deals with the celebration of Madanamahotsava in connection with the main story. The story of the novel reveals that the custom regarding this festival appears to be a huge social affair. In this carnival Kāmadeva who is the presiding god of love, physical attraction and earthly desire, is worshiped. In the novel Avinaśī the festival of Kāmadeva is celebrated in the royal garden of Bhāskaravarmā, the king of Prāgjyotiṣapura. The novelist starts the description of Madanamahotsava by saying that the madanadvādaśī of spring season has arrived.^v The people of Prāgjyotiṣapura are seen to celebrate this festival in three days on the tithis of dvādaśī, trayodaśī and caturdaśī in the month of Caitra.^{vi} They have placed the idols of Kāmadeva and Rati - the consort of Kāmadeva in this festival. The idol of Rati is placed in the left side of Kāmadeva. The author states that the statue of Kāmadeva has a bow, made of flower in his hand and He has a smiling face. After the placement of the idol in the first evening i.e. in the dvādaśītithi; people worship Kāmadeva by offering turmeric powder and sugarcane.^{vii} In the second evening i.e. in the trayodaśītithi; the women of royal harem come to visit the ideal of Madana. All the ladies wear blue coloured attire on this occasion. All the devotees wish that Kāmadeva may destroy all their mental and physical diseases.^{viii} The author has narrated the enjoyment of young people on this festival.^{ix} In this way the people of medieval Assam celebrate the festival related to god of love. So, in this way the famous carnival of Indian culture celebrated in the 7th century Assam has been projected. The Ratnāvalī of Śrī Harṣadeva of 7th century A.D. contains a detailed and vivid description of Madanamahotsava. In the very 1st act of the drama Udayana, the king of Kauśāmbi, eulogizes Kāmadeva in spring festival by saying kāmāḥ kāmamupaitvayaṃ.^x Śrī Harṣadeva has delineated the celebration of the festival in detailed in the Ratnāvalī. In this drama also the people have celebrated the Madanamahotsava by performing dance and songs, by having intoxicating liquor etc.^{xi} So, from both of the works Ratnāvalī and Avinaśī it can be assumed that during the period of 7th century A.D. people used to celebrate in modern way along with traditional process. Another important practice of the custom of śrāddha or funeral ceremony has been noticed in the novel. There is a reference of accomplishment of funeral ceremony of prince Supraṭiṣṭitavarmā by his younger brother Bhāskaravarmā with royal tradition.^{xii} Next, it has been a prevalent gesture in the societies from long runs that celebration is adjourned when some great persona is departed or ill. It is a way of showing love and respect to the person. In the novel Avinaśī this practice is followed. It is seen that due to the unhealthy condition of wounded Supraṭiṣṭitavarmā the celebration of Madana festival and dance competition in connection with the festival have been postponed.^{xiii} Again, India is always a secular country where all the religions are allowed to follow their religious conviction and customs. This sort of outlook regarding religion is noticed in the society projected in the novel Avinaśī. The novelist has referred to the equality of all religious beliefs that existed in the society of that period. There is a reference of secularism in the territory of the King Bhāskaravarmā who is an ardent devotee of Lord Śiva.^{xiv} In the kingdom of Bhāskara the Brahmins receive royal land.^{xv} The Buddhist monks are seen to be invited in the Prāgjyotiṣapura which is clear from the character Hiuen Tsang portrayed in the novel.^{xvi} The King Bhāskaravarmā himself invites the great persona Huen T-sang with great effort. So, the

story projects the secular environment of the society of Bhāskaravarmā's time. It has been said that the practice of satidāha was there in the society of medieval Assam. Mādhavī's arrival in the funeral pyre of beloved Bhāskara signifies the prevalence of practice of satidāha in the Prāgjyotiṣapura.^{xvii} It is also known from the narration that Mādhavī's mother too, on the death of her father, joined him.^{xviii} This is important to note that the practice of satidāha is also noticed in the Harṣacarita of Bāṇabhaṭṭa. Yaśomatī, the wife of Prabhākaravardhana, has entered into the fire in the river bank of Sarasvatī when her husband was in the death bed.^{xix} But the narration in these two works differs in the fact that Yaśomatī has immolated in pyre before the death of her husband who was about to die. But the Avināśi projects the immolation of the wife in the pyre of the husband. Kāpālikas, a unique section of people is noticed in the society of Prāgjyotiṣapura. This section of people holds skull-head, eats human flesh, intoxicating juice etc. The Kāpālikas are nude persons who worship Bhairava, an aggressive form of lord Śiva.^{xx} The activities of Kāpālikas and their process of worshipping are also noticed in the Mālatīmādhava of Bhavabūti.^{xxi} Again the story points out some local beliefs. For instance, the worship of goddess Pāṭālī for a male child is seen in the story.^{xxii} Thus it can be said that the author of the Avināśi has projected a society with all the colours. It is true that he has taken the concepts from various sources prevalent before him, but the style of amalgamation and presentation remains as a sign of scholarship of the writer.

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- iii Gaḍurapurāṇam, XXXIII.30
- iv Avināśi, pp.11-12
- v atha madanadvādaśī samāgatā.....madanadarśanāya samāgatāḥ/ Ibid., p.160
- vi Ibid.
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- viii Ibid.
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- xiii Ibid., p.47
- xiv Ibid., p.128
- xv brāhmaṇāḥ agrahārabhūmibhaktam bhuñjate/ Ibid.
- xvi Ibid.
- xvii Ibid., p.189
- xviii pita kāladharmeṇoparato mātā sahamṛtā/ Ibid., p.2

^{xix} tatra ca strīsvabhāvakātarairdṛṣṭipātaiḥ pravikasitaraktapañkajapuñjairivārcayitvā bhagavanam bhānumantamivamūrtiraindavī citrabhānum prāviśat/ The Harshacarita of Bāṇabhaṭṭa, V. (With Saṅketa Sanskrit Commentary of Śaṅkara Kavi). Ed. Kāśināth Pāṇḍurang Parab. Bombay (Now Mumbai); Tukārām Jāvaji, 1918(Rpt. of 4th edn.), p.31

^{xx} nagnān kāpālikān narakapālahastān bhairavañca pānāsaktam..../Biswanarayan Shastri, Avināśi, p. 163

^{xxi} The Mahābhārata (vols. I & IV).V. Poona; The Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute, pp. 165-252

^{xxii} Avināśi,pp.59-60