

The Use of Religious Themes in the Satires of Kṣemendra

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The 11th-century Kashmiri writer-poet-literary critic Kṣemendra (circa 990–after 1066) left an imposingly vast oeuvre to posterity,¹ notable not only for the sheer number of works, but also the diversity of its genres. At the same time, virtually every extant piece of this colourful life work demonstrates an explicit intent to educate, in addition to entertaining its audience, offering help to the reader in everyday matters by guidance and example along the lines of the author's beliefs.

Kṣemendra employs a variety of tools to achieve these results, depending on the subject and genre of the given text. In his poetics (*Aucityavicāracarcā*, *Kavikaṇṭhābharaṇa*, *Suṃṛttatilaka*) instruction and illustration dominate: in these works he uses examples – from his own poetry and that of others – to illustrate what makes a literary work valuable or worthless, or what values and character traits must be learned on the path to becoming a poet. In these didactic works he gives guidance and useful practical advice to his readers primarily on the themes of *artha* and *dharma*.

The primary instrument of education and guidance in Kṣemendra's most popular works, the one's that have occupied the centre of attention, is satire: the author good humouredly pillories individuals, and ridicules various negative character traits or phenomena. His humour is often not just sharp and mocking, but also takes the form of coarse language, which Kṣemendra is himself conscious of. In his introduction to the *Deśopadeśa* he even notes, as a sort of caution, that his work "is by no means for those who have been sullied, even a little, by the illusory vice of hypocrisy."²

One of the identifiers of the free-spirited criticism typical of Kṣemendra is that it frequently plays on a religious theme, levelled indirectly or point blank at certain religious practices, or the either assumed or real religiousness of par-

¹ See the complete summary of Kṣemendra's extant and lost works in L. Sternbach, *Unknown Verses Attributed to Kṣemendra*, Lucknow 1979.

² *Deśopadeśa*, 1.3ab.: "ye dambhamāyāmayadoṣaśāliptā na me tān prati ko 'pi yatnaḥ".

ticular individuals. The satirical depiction of religious themes is important, not only because of the information they pass on to us about society and certain religious practices and phenomena in Kashmir at the time of Kṣemendra, but also because of the insight we are given into the author's own religiousness and world view.

Our knowledge about Kṣemendra's religiousness, along with other biographical details are based on his own works, and the introduction written by his son Somendra to the *Avadānakalpalatā*. Kṣemendra was born in a *Śaiva* family—his father, Prakāśendra, was a fervent devotee of God Śiva, erecting statues and generously supporting the priests—and was early reared in this spirit. His famous teacher, Abhinavagupta was also a *Śaiva*. Later however, under the influence of another one of his teachers, Somapāda he became a *Vaiṣṇava*, and called himself Vyāsadāsa, the disciple of Vyāsa in his works. This change plays a fundamental role in the germination of Kṣemendra's final work about the acts of Viṣṇu in his ten *avatars*, the *Daśāvatāracarita*, which he wrote at the end of his life. This work is not only interesting from a *Vaiṣṇava* perspective, but also because this is the earliest known writing in which the Buddha appears as an *avatāra* of Viṣṇu. The *jātaka* collection composed of 108 chapters telling the stories of the former lives of the Buddha, entitled *Avadānakalpalatā*, is a fruit of Kṣemendra's interest in Buddhism.³ This work, written upon the request of his paternal friend and pupil Sajjānanda, and with the help of a monk called Vīryabhadra, was later also translated into Tibetan, and given as a gift to the abbot of the Sakya order, Sakya Pandita, in 1202. Kṣemendra's interest in Buddhism did not however mean another shift, since his final work, mentioned above, the *Daśāvatāracarita* was plainly written in a *Vaiṣṇava* spirit.

On the basis of biographical data, it can therefore be established that Kṣemendra was also open and curious in the sphere of religion, acceding to the influence of some of his teachers.

In Kṣemendra's satirical works,⁴ it is possible to essentially differentiate between three forms he used to present phenomena related to religion in a critical light, which can be described as follows:

1. Zealous religiousness as disguise to cover over sinful, immoral activities.
2. Censure of the immorality of individual gurus and masters.
3. Religion as a tool to deceive others, abuse their ignorance and superstition.

Though there are no distinctive borders between the above categories, in fact they are often found to overlap, a few examples to demonstrate each category are given below.

The first theme is most spectacularly at work in the book, *Narmamālā*. *Narmamālā* pillories the deceitful, immoral nature and customs of the *kāyasthas*—the caste serving as court bureaucrats, officials, scribes—, and through them

³ The last chapter is the work of Kṣemendra's son, Somendra.

⁴ *Kalāvīlāsa*, *Samayamātrkā*, *Narmamālā* and *Deśopadeśa*.

describes the general moral decline of the era. As depicted in Kṣemendra's work, as soon as the *kāyastha* secures a position he uses it solely to further his own economic interests, and so under the "reign" of the *kāyasthas* the kingdom breaks down and disintegrates. Their common feature is that in order to camouflage all these activities they show themselves as zealously religious individuals. Once by virtue of his hypocritical behaviour he rose from the position of village administrator (*grāmaniyoga*) and was appointed *grhakarṭyādhipati*,⁵ the *kāyastha* surrounded himself with hundreds of servants and hypocritically showed continuous sacrificial offerings to Śiva, reading hymns with teary eyes.⁶ The religious camouflage served worldly goals however: the fleecing of subjects, grabbing the wealth, lands, and revenues of the temples at all costs, even if it meant overturning, flouting traditional religious values.

In the introduction to *Narmamālā*, Kṣemendra compares King Ananta (1028–1063)—who ended the reign of corrupt officials—to God Viṣṇu, and the *kāyastha* to Śiva, through a witty play on words.⁷ In Baldissera's opinion⁸ the author may here be reflecting on his own switch (from *Śaiva* to *Vaiṣṇava*), but this is not imperative. A comparison of the ideal ruler to Viṣṇu seems only natural, and so does that of a *kāyastha* to Śiva, the "destroyer of three cities", especially considering the possibilities to be exploited in the use of *samāsokti* (concise speech) and *śleṣa* (pun, words with double meaning): through the positions they filled they could acquire power that enabled them to ruin the whole country.

The theme of immoral gurus and teachers frequently finds expression in Kṣemendra's satires. In the second part of *Narmamālā* at first (33–36) a *maṭhadaiśika*⁹ appears, with designs on the wife of the *kāyastha*, and finds employ as a teacher to his children in order to seduce the woman. Being successful, the woman no longer desires her husband, so when he returns, she pretends to be ill.

For a solution, the *kāyastha*—originally a Buddhist, then a *Vaiṣṇava* and later a *Śaiva* (now a *niyogin*, i.e. official)—turns to his personal master, a guru who also follows the tantric school of *śaivism*, for a sacrifice to be shown for his wife's health. Verses 100–116 give a graphic portrait of the guru. Kṣemendra

⁵ A kind of court official, internal minister. See *Rājataranṅiṇī*, 6.166.

⁶ *Narmamālā*, 1.38.

⁷ *Narmamālā*, 1.7b. The line *utpattisthitisarṅhārahākāriṇe purahāriṇe* can have various readings, for example: "[Obeisance] to Śiva, the creator, preserver and destroyer", or "[Obeisance] to the sacker of cities, the gatherer of material profit and high rank".

⁸ F. Baldissera, *The Narmamālā of Kṣemendra. Critical Edition, Study and Translation*. [Beiträge zur Südasiensforschung. Südasiens-Institut Universität Heidelberg], Würzburg 2005, 39.

⁹ A monk or guru living in a *maṭha*, i.e. the monastery belonging to a *Śaiva* temple. On the interchangeability of the words *daiśika* (relating to or originating from a particular place or country) and *deśika* (spiritual leader, master, guru) see Baldissera, *The Narmamālā*, 78.

describes the figure to be large of build and revolting in appearance (his size similar to that of a *rākṣasa*, mouth like the sexual organ of a cow), but the parts dealing with his character, in fitting with his appearance, are the most eloquent: the guru is imperious, hypocritical, and avaricious,¹⁰ deprives the man of his estate and his wife,¹¹ guzzles alcohol,¹² with his mind completely blinded by drunkenness and ignorance.¹³

In the eight chapters of the *Deśopadeśā* the author presents and caricatures a variety of everyday figures and their negative character traits. In the final, eighth chapter of this work a shorter section can be found (Chapter 8, verses 2–4), with a similar description of a guru as that in the *Narmamālā*, repeating many of the adjectives: the figure is full of passion and hatred, avaricious, ignorant and hypocritical, and moreover he seduces the wives of his students.¹⁴ The initiation ceremony serves no other purpose than to strip his followers of their money. Like in verse 112 of Chapter 2 in the *Narmamālā*, Kṣemendra plays with the various meanings of the word guru (heavy, large, excessive, important, respectable, master) in the 2nd verse of Chapter 8 of the *Deśopadeśā*, making the difference between the expected and actual character of the given person tangible by these means.¹⁵ However the guru is not only characterized by his own personal traits, but also who his followers are: each and every one of them the kind who seeks to exploit religion towards covering a worldly, sinful, or immoral act. As in the *Narmamālā*, an official also appears here among the disciples, and though he has stolen all the belongings of the gods (i.e. temples), Brahmins, cities large and small, villages, and stations of herdsmen, he is still ready to rob more, and so turns to the guru,¹⁶ while also among the characters is a married woman cheating on her husband with the guru.¹⁷

We come across the character of the dissipated *Śaiva* monk in one of the scenes of *Samayamātrkā* as well; here he wakes to the first crow of the cock and scurries from the house of the courtesan back to the *maṭha* on the backstreets, carefully avoiding the mainstreet.¹⁸

¹⁰ *Narmamālā*, 2.102.

¹¹ *Narmamālā*, 2.103.

¹² *Narmamālā*, 2.107.

¹³ *Narmamālā*, 2.111.

¹⁴ *Deśopadeśā*, 8.3., literally *śiṣyavadhūnārṇ sadā gururgaditaḥ*, or “he is always being rumoured to be the guru of the wives of [his] pupils”.

¹⁵ *Narmamālā*, 2.112: *guruścitraṃ sarvaguruḥ śivoditamahāśikṣāsu nityaṃ laghuḥ* – “it is strange that the master (guru) is heavy (eminent, ponderous) in all ways, but always [found to be] light in the great teachings uttered by Śiva”. *Deśopadeśā*, 8.3.: *gurumapi lāghavaheturṃ* – this part of the sentence can be translated in two ways: “[Obeisance to him, who] though large, heavy/master, is still the cause of lightness/insignificance”.

¹⁶ *Deśopadeśā*, 8.5.

¹⁷ *Deśopadeśā*, 8.8.

¹⁸ *Samayamātrkā*, 6.9.

The *Samayamāṭṛkā* offers numerous more examples of the third theme, especially in Chapter 2, which describes the adventures of the bawd Kaṅkāli. Kaṅkāli's whole life story spins around misleading and deceiving gullible, ignorant, superstitious people, and one of the most common tools in this activity is feigned religiousness, the exploitation of religious appearances. In the course of her life the woman travelled throughout Kashmir taking up innumerable names and identities, deluding and looting dozens of people along the way.

In verse 43 of Chapter 2, after having defrauded her lover, an official, of all his belongings, she finds refuge in a *śākta maṭha*. Later (Ch. 2, v. 61), she settles in a Buddhist monastery as a nun under the name of Vajraghaṅṭā, and for income she sells a variety of talismans to ignorant people, giving lessons in sinful artifice to women of good families, teaching courtesans how to find clients, and merchants how they can multiply their wealth, gaining great respect among people by this means.

On another occasion (Ch. 2, v. 85) she calls herself Bhāvasiddhi, and utters no word apart from "Make offerings!". Later, as Kumbhādevī (Ch. 2, v. 86), she begins to walk naked, surrounded by dogs, and finds followers by this means.¹⁹ She is approached by a minister called Kuladāsa, who asks for initiation by her, but the woman ditches him after stealing the silver bowl meant to be used for the ceremony.

Kaṅkāli later leaves Kashmir, and crops up around various parts of India, once posing as a Brahmin woman, once as an adept of yoga, an ascetic, or a pilgrim, to win the trust of gullible people.

These examples illustrate the way religious motives often appear in Kṣemendra's satires as one of the tools of social critique. The author does not criticise religion itself, only particular phenomena associated with it, which he himself considers deviations, similarly to the individuals who use religion to fool others in the course of their sinful activities. But the victims of these frauds cannot count on the sympathy of the author either: it soon turns out that they are the victims primarily of their own gullibility, ignorance, greed, or immorality, and therefore do not differ greatly from the frauds. The character portraits are often distinguished by biting scorn, which displays splendidly how clearly he disassociates himself from his characters. His perhaps most exact formulation of his position is given at the beginning of the *Kalāvīlāsa's* Chapter 10:

"One should know the tricks of the fraudsters, but should not pursue them himself;

the wise desire virtuous arts to ensure their own wellbeing."²⁰

¹⁹ On the possible meanings of the name Kumbhādevī see Gy. Wojtilla, Notes on popular Saivism and Tantra in eleventh century Kashmir. In: Ligeti L (ed.) *Tibetan and Buddhist Studies commemorating the 200th anniversary of the birth of Alexander Csoma de Kőrös*, Budapest 1984, 381-389.

²⁰ *Kalāvīlāsa*, 10.1.: *etā vañcakamāyā vijñeyā na tu punaḥ svayaṁ sevyaḥ / dharmyaḥ kalākālpo viduṣāmayaṁ īpsito bhūtyaiḥ*.

In the case of the religious motives that appear in the satires, the predominance of Śaiva tantric movements is plainly apparent. The negative figures and phenomena are associated with this movement in an overwhelming majority of the cases, they are the targets of the writing that takes an often witty, at other times sarcastic, even at times antagonistic tone. These factors are worthy of attention, because in the era in which Kṣemendra was writing, besides śaivism, vaiṣṇavism, Buddhism also flourished in Kashmir. Though the biographical data available on the author makes it clear that he had himself become a Vaiṣṇava after having been a Śaiva, this in itself cannot suffice as explanation for the mentioned imbalance. It seems more likely that Kṣemendra expressly rejected the flagrant and shocking practices, irreconcilable with a traditionally conceived religiousness, of the so called “left handed” tantra, and that the unusual features of this religious practice simply fit the genre of satire perfectly. For though the author emphasises the didactic character of satire in his introduction to the *Deśopadeśa* (“A person shamed by laughter will not commit sins thereafter; I have made this effort for their benefit”²¹), as Michael Straube aptly noted, “in reading his satires one gets the strong impression that he—far from being a dry moralist—also had a good deal of pleasure in composing them.”²²

While we may not come to know the author’s inner motivations exactly, a further, more thorough analysis of his satires may play an extremely important role in extending our knowledge on the popular religiousness of Kashmir in his days—the way in which the various Śaiva, Vaiṣṇava, or Buddhist teachings and traditions were reflected in the lives of everyday people belonging to different social layers.

²¹ *Deśopadeśa*, 1.4.: *hāsenā lajjito 'tyantaṁ na doṣeṣu pravartate / janastadupakārāya mamāyaṁ svayamudyamaḥ*.

²² M. Straube, “Remarks on a New Edition and Translation of Kṣemendra’s *Narmamālā*,” *Indo-Iranian Journal*, 49 (2006), 163.