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Political Influence on Performing Arts in Mauryan Empire

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Abstract

The study of various inscriptions reveals a region's true history as we understand an empire's political, economic, cultural, and social conditions and about the emperors who ruled it. Such information obtained through the inscriptions is crucial because the political conditions that result from an emperor's governance directly influence its people and their socio-economic conditions. Performing arts has been thriving under the patronage of the various emperors who ruled in the Indian subcontinent. This paper focuses on understanding the political influence of performing arts in the Mauryan empire through a qualitative study of its historical, literary, and epigraphical records.

Keywords: Performing arts, music, dance, festivities, political influence, Mauryan empire

Objective: To understand the contribution and patronage of the Maurya dynasty toward performing arts and the influence of polity on performing arts in the Mauryan empire of ancient India.

Methodology: The research paper is based on the historical research method through the qualitative analysis of the historical data obtained through various inscriptions, sculptures, literature, and other secondary sources.

Analysis: The three prominent rulers of the Mauryan empire namely Chandragupta Maurya, Bindusāra, and Aśoka[i]. All three of them were eminent administrators despite their differing approaches. We get to know about the administration of Mauryan emperors through some literary works like *Arthaśāstra* of Kauṭilya, the travelogue of Megasthenes, and some of the Sanskrit, Buddhist, and Pāḻi literature like *Mudrārakṣasa, Jātaka tales, Dhammapada, Lalitavistara* and so on. Aśokan rock edicts are an important epigraphical source to understand his administration. Some major rock edicts are Śahabāzgarhi, Khālsi, Grinār, Dhaul, and Jaugada rock edicts. There are also several minor rock edicts of Aśoka spread across the country. Many Stūpas, Pillars, caves, and buildings go to the architectural achievements of king Aśoka.

The information about dance and dancers is present in this historical evidence through which we understand the patronage of Mauryan kings towards performing arts. It is also evident through these records that the polity had a good influence on the performing arts in the Mauryan empire. In the great Stūpa of *Sānchi* built by king Aśoka[ii], there are many ornamental carvings found, which include the *Śālabhanjikas.* They depict a certain dance movement that resembles the *cārīs* mentioned in *Nāṭyaśāstra* opines Kapila Vatsyayana[iii]. These *Śālabhanjika* figurines that are seen holding the branches of trees indicate the Dohad celebration, which is a kind of social festivity performed by young girls during the spring season. It included merry-making, music, and dancing. The construction of such decorative *stūpas* and the depiction of such festivities on those *stūpās* both indicates the encouragement of such festivity by the Mauryan kings and their patronage of art. It is interesting to explore further the different kinds of influence that each of the Mauryan kings had on the performing arts of those times.

The administration of Mauryan empire during the reign of Chandragupta Maurya was well-balanced. He encouraged organizing a lot of *utsava* and *samāja*[iv]. Performing artists participated in these social events called *Samāja (*as described in *Arthaśāstra* of Kauṭilya[v]*)*. A *Samāja*[vi] was a grand festivity that was usually organized in an amphitheater[vii] which included a lot of amusements like animal fights and acrobatics along with music, dance, storytelling, musical concerts with a variety of instruments like cymbals, gongs,[viii] and so on. The performing space was so huge that about 500 dancers[ix] could dance at a time. These festivities witnessed many dancing troupes[1] who traveled from far-off regions to take part in it. Such description of these grand festivals suggests to us that during Chandragupta's reign, performing arts were very grand, extravagant, and *rājasik* in nature.

In Mauryan times the courtesans were of different types. A courtesan clan called *Gaṇika* was the most superior among them and was an expert in all sixty-four forms of art including music and dance[x]. During Chandragupta's reign, the royal courts had such courtesan dancers[2] who worked in various jobs. These skillsets required vocational training and expertise, as only the well-deserving candidate was bestowed with an opportunity to serve in the royal court. It means that there were a lot of career opportunities for performing artists and they lived a life of dignity. Whether the king was seated on the throne, in the chariot, or a palanquin, the courtesans were at the king's service bearing chowrie, umbrella, golden pitchers, and fans[xi]. The organizational structure of such courtesans is defined in *Arthaśāstra* of Kauṭilya[xii]. Kauṭilya[3] even gives an account of the salary

[1] Budhagosha's commentary on Buddhist Pāli text *Dhammapada's verse 348* called *Uggasenavatthu* (24th part, 6th chapter) is a story about *Uggasena,* a man who falls in love with a damsel. In the story budhagosha describes about a wandering theatrical troupe who goes to a place called *Rājagaha* and perform before the king Bimbisāra. The troupe consisted of about 500 dancers. There is beautiful description of the damsel's dance on a bamboo pole. The description goes as *"mahājano mañcātimañcadisu thatvā samajja olokesi"* (Norman,1970, p.59) where *mañcātimañca* means an amphitheatre.

[2] Gaṇikās

[3] Well known as Cāṇākya who mentored Chandragupta Maurya

paid to the courtesans of three different categories the superior, middle, and inferior[4]. This job structure included a superintendent of all the courtesans as well. It shows that the courtesan dancers were multitalented and were employable in multiple domains and disciplines as per their skill sets.

Megasthenes was a Greek traveler who visited the Mauryan empire during Chandragupta's reign. Megasthenes mentions the people and life in the Mauryan empire in his travelogue *Indica*. Chandragupta Maurya even had a marital alliance with a Greek potentate[xiii]. Hence the art during Chandragupta Maurya's reign shows Greek and Roman influence as there was a lot of cultural exchange. The exchange of art and culture among the Greek and Roman scholars, philosophers, and writers is evident in the historical accounts by Dion Chrysostom who was a Greek philosopher and orator. Terracotta figurines of the Maurya period belonging to multiple ethnicities lead to the understanding that the performing arts had multiple varieties enriched by local and foreign cultural influences. Such possibilities occur through the support and encouragement of the ruler.

During the reign of Bindusāra, another Greek traveler named Diamachus visited the empire[xiv]. The letters exchanged between the two on a friendly note give an account of the diplomatic relationships that Bindusara established between his empire and other foreign powers like China, Egypt, and central Asia. He often sent his messengers to foreign empires to extend bilateral relations. His political interests and able administration lead to several activities in the city, taken care of by the council of about thirty ministers. It involved caring for and comforts of foreigner residents in the city[xv]. Such well-thought-of governance accounts for the probability of many activities in the city involving performing arts.

Further, looking into the Aśokan inscriptions we get a good idea of the political influence on performing arts. Aśokan edicts are invaluable historical records as they're the earliest known epigraphical records of ancient Indian history. Inscriptions of Aśoka are one of the earliest ones discovered[xvi] on rocks and pillars through which we understand the Aśokan way of administration. In the rock edicts of Aśoka, we come across many ordinances which he passed during his reign. Aśoka issued several edicts after his conquest of Kaliṅga[xvii]. The great Inscription of Aśoka at Shahbazgarhi[xviii] is one such important edict that mentions about the abolishment of the festive meets called *Samāja*. The first rock edict of Aśoka starts as,

> *"ayam dhammalipi …devanampiyena ranya lekhapita idha na kinchi jivam avabida paju hitavyam na cha samaje katavyo bahukam hi dosam samajamhi. Pasati devanampiyo piyadasi raja asti pitu ekacha samaja sadhumata devanampiyasa piyadasino ranyo puta mahanasaphi devanampiyasa piyadasino supathya sa aja yada ayam dhammalipi likhita……"* [xix] *(Cunningham, 65)*

The edict mentions the abolishment of convivial meets. Through such ordinances, we understand the inclination of the king toward spirituality. Hence any performances or festive celebrations that

[4] A thousand *paṇas*

can be thought of, that were compliant to his ordinances, would be spiritual and *sātvika* in nature. The prevalent political scenario during Aśokan rule suggests that any performances during festivities and social gatherings perhaps were spiritual, simple, subtle, and sober involving *kaiśiki vṛtti* which is the graceful style, rather than being grand and extravagant. Abolishment of *samāja* festivities might have given a new dimension to performing arts where the artists performed more spiritual themes, as art was expected to be a medium to liberate the mind and soul from worldly pleasures. Here abolishment need not mean that dancing troupes went short of opportunities. Instead, the social setup might have transformed the way performances were looked at. In terms of the treatment of a presentation, it might have had a significant influence on being able to visualize a theme with the same vantage point as that of the king and relate it to life. In the present Covid-19 pandemic and the subsequent lockdown, when all the performance spaces were closed[xx], the situation did not deteriorate the courage of the performing artists, but they found new ventures like online concerts, and they kept performing on social media. So, we can understand that art is always undeterred, dared to take the test of time and situation, evolve into something new and fresh, and stood tall at different times in history.

Conclusion:

The Maurya dynasty was among the earliest known dynasties of which archaeological evidence exists to date. The inscriptions, sculptures, and literature available in fragments help to reconstruct the history of ancient times. Having thought of such things as inscribing the ordinance on stones, and constructing stone monuments to preserve for future generations, takes Mauryan emperors thousands of years ahead of their times. It proves that they were great visionaries. Their contribution to this cause is a revolutionary and unparalleled one.

Mauryan political history shows the immense influence of performing arts in a very positive and progressive way. In any political scenario, the statutes passed by the ruling authority will have a greater impact on the social life of the people. It is as much true about the performing arts and artists as well.

We have seen in recent times where a lot of performing arts are being involved in the republic day parades. Such a move by the Indian central government has not only created an opportunity for the display of the performing arts but also motivated a lot of young and aspiring professional artists. Similarly, through the study of the administrative pattern of Mauryan rulers, we understand that performing arts thrived during Mauryan reign irrespective of, the king's belief in the philosophy of life, and of his convictions towards living life. Such adaptability is the root strength of the Indian culture which is like a tree that shelters several belief systems, philosophies, and lifestyles.

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