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## Portrayal of Aristocracy versus Theocracy in the Play *Thirumal Naicker*

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### Abstract:

In the Vedic times, Indian administration was a fine blending of aristocracy and theocracy. The interpretation of the rules of the Dharma was in the hands of the Indian Priests and the King followed them. However, the priests emotionally exploited the masses. The playwright Dr Bedre was conscious of the exploitation and presented the mythic story of South Indian King Thirumal Naicker. He crafted carefully the theme in the modern light in his play *Thirumal Naicker*. The King is informed about the economic misappropriation by the priest of the Meenakshi Temple. King Thirumala plans to lock the donation box of the temple and to utilize the temple funds for welfare schemes of his State. The King finally arrests Head Priest Bhudeva and orders his younger brother to take him in custody until final order of the Royal Court. Priest Bhudeva instigates the King's brother against the King. Unfortunately, the King's brother becomes a prey of the instigation of the priest Bhudeva. The King is murdered in a secret tunnel when he was going to the temple. The struggle between the aristocracy and theocracy is a classical theme of many masterpieces of the world. T. S. Eliot's celebrated classic *Murder in the Cathedral* is a masterpiece. Dr Bedre's *Thirumal Naicker* and T. S. Eliot's *Murder in the Cathedral* seem to be opposite to each other. Many Kings like Thirumala were never against any religion but were always against the corrupt practices and the economic exploitation at the hands of the priests.

**Keywords:** King, Priest, Struggle, Aristocracy, Theocracy, Misappropriation.

The English word 'Religion' is commonly used with the Indian word 'Dharma'. It is derived from the ancient Sanskrit root 'Dhruva' which means to provide good outlook. In the Vedic times, ancient Indian administration was a fine blending of aristocracy and theocracy. The authority of the King was supreme, however, it was expected that the King should rule for the welfare of his subjects according to the principles set by the ancient Dharma. Here, it should be noted that the interpretation of the rules of the Dharma was in the hands of the Indian Priests and the King always followed them. The system continued for a long time. However, in the course of time, certain corrupt practices emerged. The clergies who were expected to be impartial and ready for any sacrifice in favour of society became selfish and the Indian history has recorded a struggle between Indian aristocracy and theocracy. Dr R T Bedre has carefully set his drama *Thirumal Naicker* on the ancient theme in a splendid manner.

Literary critics, all over the world, are of the opinion that the creative artist expresses through his creation by his personal experiences as well as the currents of his own age. Dr Bedre is also not an exception. He is essentially the product of his age. He is a young writer born in 1973. He is engaged in a noble teaching profession. His 'Muse' compels him to give something new to his fellow citizens. He has studied carefully the moral and the social currents in which one cannot deny the pretense and hypocrisy in the behaviour of the priests all over the world. He observes specifically its zenith in India. The priests are engaged in the economic exploitation of the common masses. They tell them miraculous stories of astrology and Providence and further advise them that deities may be gratified by offering wealth through the rituals. The present researcher has no grudge against the priestly class, however, in most of the times such rituals are unnecessary. In some of the rituals, the animals are killed in the name of worship. Economic misappropriation in the funds of the religious places has become a grave reality. The socially conscious writer like Dr Bedre must have become pessimistic and the present play *Thirumal Naicker* is set upon the life and works of the ancient South Indian King Thirumal Naicker. This play is the product of his dramatic art and it must be read with his age.

The present researcher is acquainted with the playwright as the member of the same teaching profession. It is found that Dr Bedre always refers to English critics like T. S. Eliot and W. H. Auden. These two writers are known throughout the world for their masterpieces, *Four Quartets* and *The Shield of Achilles*. Auden is not only describing the ancient Greek hero and his art of war but also he is simultaneously depicting the evils of the modern wars. The aforementioned English writers had witnessed the most destructive First World War (1914 – 1918), the bloody Russian Revolution (1916 -1919) and the last but not least the annihilating Second World War (1939 – 1945). All these events changed totally the face of the world. Monarchy and aristocracy has been substituted by pseudo democracy in many countries. Literary artists depicted the futility of such hypocrisy through their creative arts.

Dr Bedre has carefully crafted the ancient theme in the modern light in his play *Thirumal Naicker*. His real intention includes the depiction of the historical facts, however, strictly under their modern interpretation because he analyzes the modern social currents with a zeal to improve them in an impartial manner. He expects an Egalitarian society with Fabian roots. *Thirumal Naicker* is a popular play written in 2007. In the very prologue of the book, the dramatist pays gratitude to Shri Girish Karnad. It seems that he is deeply impressed by the dramatic art of Karnad especially his masterpieces like *Tughlaq*, *The Fire and the Rain*, *Dreams of Tipu Sultan*, *Hayavadana*, *Tale-Dande* etc. He further tells us that he had a great opportunity to listen to Professor R. Ramamoorti, an eminent academician and literary critic of high repute from the esteemed Madurai Kamraj University, Tamil Nadu. It seems that Dr Bedre heard the importance of the contribution of the ancient King Thirumal Naicker from Madurai. He must have thought of the ancient history under the modern light through his dramatic art. He sent his first draft to Professor P. Lal who not only appreciated but also advised him to publish it. In the course of time, it was published by the Writers Workshop.

*Thirumal Naicker* is a play written in thirteen scenes. Most of the scenes are depicted in the ancient Capital city Madurai, presently, a District place in Tamil Nadu. In the olden times, it was the Capital of the massive South Indian Empire. Wherever we read the first scene, we find a miraculous opening of the drama. There is a part played by ‘Sutradhar’ (Director). Such type of drama with a prologue from ‘Sutradhar’ is a basic characteristic of the ancient Indian dramatic art form. The plays like *Abhijnana Shakuntalam* (by Kalidasa), *Mudrarakshasa* (by Vishakhadatta), *Mrcchakatika* (by Sudraka) - all have such type of opening in which the ‘Sutradhar’ plays an important part. He introduces us and then leads us to the dramatic story. The Greco-Roman plays and even the English plays are not opened in this manner. Here, one can easily say that Dr Bedre was more impressed by Kalidasa than that of Shakespeare. We find King Thirumala with one of his queens whose name is not mentioned anywhere. The King is informed about the economic misappropriation by the priest of the Meenakshi Temple. The Head Priest Bhudeva Shastri is engrossed fully in malpractices. King Thirumala discusses the matter with his queen with his future plans of impounding its moveable and immovable property into his Kingdom. He plans to appoint priests in the religious service with fixed remuneration in the State without any authority over the temple donations. It is evident from the play:

“THIRUMALA: Your doubts sound true. We too have heard such things after listening to the reports and giving it serious thoughts, we have come to the conclusion that something is rotten there. Anybody can be tempted at the temple’s growing wealth. We are thinking to appoint a State administrator there to see the accounts and explore the possibilities whether the surplus can be used for the welfare of the people.

QUEEN: Noble thought Maharaj. But Maharaj should be quiet careful since it is the religious matter. The priests may think and interpret it to the people that the King is interfering with the temple affairs. People can easily be misled with the temple issue. Religion is the weapon for the priests. Maharaj needs to be careful.” (Bedre 2007: 20)

King Thirumala is a just and a noble king who is concerned only with the welfare of his subjects. He confirms and concludes that there is misappropriation of money in the temple’s growing wealth. The queen realizes him about the seriousness of the religious matters. According to her, the religious matters are sensitive and they may create havoc when they are interpreted indifferently. The priest may use religion as his weapon. So, religious matters should be handled carefully. Consequently, the King plans to lock the donation box of the temple and thus to utilize the temple funds for welfare schemes of his State which required huge amount of money. He further tried to appoint an accountant in the temple but the Priest Bhudeva expelled him. The queen advises the King in the following words: “QUEEN: Maharaj, but be careful, priest is a cunning fellow.” (Bedre 2007: 20). The above words of the queen are landmark and even in the modern light. The religious matters are delicate. They can arouse the emotions of the people against the State. Sometimes, the religious assembly becomes violent and many socio-political upheavals are hidden under its garb. The King finally arrests Bhudeva and orders his younger brother to take him in custody until final order of the Royal Court. Priest Bhudeva, a veteran in corrupt practices, instigates the King’s

brother against the King. The fact is revealed delicately from the following dialogues between Bhudeva and Uncle (King's brother):

BHUDEVA: You are a simpleton. You can't see that the boy fixes you title not by your age? Why don't you assert yourself when you have capacity to?

UNCLE: What exactly have I to do?

BHUDEVA: To become king.

UNCLE: What?

BHUDEVA: Yes. The old man though strong has lost his sense. He may disappear any time and the prince is too young to take over the state. Someone like you should prepare for that.

UNCLE: Will people accept me?

BHUDEVA: Why not? If the temple supports... After the removal of the king, Amma will visit me and reveal her wish to make you King.

UNCLE: Is it possible?

BHUDEVA: As much as Shankarnand's death, only you have to cooperate us to fulfill Amma's wish." (Bedre 2007: 28 – 29)

Bhudeva, the priest, instigates Uncle's hidden ambition for the crown. He tries to persuade Uncle by using astonishing language. He utters that Uncle is simple. He has capacity to run the State. King Thirumala has lost his sense though he is strong and he may disappear at any time and the Prince is too young to take the charge of the State. Further, he suggests him that he should prepare for becoming the King. He assures him that all the people of the State will accept him as their King when the temple supports him. He clears his plan that Goddess Amma will visit him after the removal of the King and reveals her wish that Uncle should be crowned as the King. In this manner, Bhudeva tells the King's brother to usurp the Kingdom by setting aside the claim of the young Prince and even to commit regicide if required. Unfortunately, the King's brother becomes a prey of the instigation of the priest Bhudeva. The King is murdered in a secret tunnel when he was going to the temple. The queen also dies due to the sudden disappearance of the King. Meanwhile, Bhudeva is acquitted from all the charges. He keeps his promise and helps Uncle for becoming the King of the State. The Prince is intelligent enough to understand the situation and finds out the truth that his own Uncle and Bhudeva are the culprits. Subsequently, young Prince expresses his sorrow over the death of his father and takes over the charge of the State and orders:

“PRINCE: (*Goes near to the body of Thirumala*) Here lies my beloved father whose only aim in life was the welfare of his subjects. He did not bother even to use means for them. And died such kind of death. He did not deserve it. He was a warrior par excellence. I would not have felt sorry if he had died in the battlefield. (*Suddenly growing tense*). Minister, I order you to arrest all those who are suspected to have involved. Bring Bhudeva, uncle, Lobhi and other priests right before Maharaja's funeral and execute them publicly. Don't show any pity to them. People should learn what is like betraying against the King. Bring them from hell. I won't excuse delay, understand?

MINISTER: Yes, Yuvraj.

PRINCE: Henceforth no priest will be the head of temple but the King will be the supreme. The crown will control all the matters. Religion and priests need to be discriminated. Religion shall be a means to public welfare. It shall not have any upper hand. Henceforth the temple should bow before and respect to the crown. Declare three-day state mourning. Inform the neighbouring kings and start the preparation for our coronation.” (Bedre 2007: 45 – 46)

In this way, the Prince punishes everyone who is involved in the regicide. Besides, he abolishes the authority of priests on the temple. He brings the temple under his control and discriminates religion and priests. Religion is considered as a means of public welfare without having any upper hand. Aristocracy gains supremacy over theocracy.

The playwright depicts carefully the scenes of anarchy. The King, Prince, King’s brother and the lords of the court are all the members of the ancient aristocracy while Bhudeva, the Head Priest and other Priests in the Kingdom are the members of theocracy. In ancient India, there was practically no written constitution while the powers of the King, aristocrats, military personnel and theocrats were - all based on ancient customs. It was expected that they all should work in harmony and cooperation and ultimately their aim must be- “Bahujan Hitaya Bahujan Sukhaya” (Maximum good of the maximum number). The playwright concludes his play with such an optimistic note. However, the dramatist has cited certain modern Hindi songs in the prologue of the play. In the opening scene, we find a man named Govindan who played the role of an actor singing those songs. The modern songs in the medieval setting becomes slightly irrelevant.

The struggle between the aristocracy and the theocracy has become a theme of many masterpieces of the world. T. S. Eliot has portrayed an important side of such struggle in his classic *Murder in the Cathedral*. The play enumerates historical story of Thomas Becket (Archbishop of Canterbury) and King Henry II. It deals with clash between Thomas Becket and King Henry II. King Henry II tries to remove some of the powers of Catholic Church. But, Becket shows his resistance against Henry’s political interference. It creates chaos in the State. Further, Becket started to excommunicate members of the English court from the church. As a result, four knights put the charge of misuse of the power of Archbishop Position, hence, they killed Becket in the Cathedral. In a sense, Dr Bedre’s *Thirumal Naicker* and T. S. Eliot’s *Murder in the Cathedral* seem to be opposite to each other. A close observation is bound to tell us about the struggle which the ancient State had with the religion. Many Kings like Thirumala were never against any religion but finally were always against the corrupt practices and the economic exploitation at the hands of the priests. Besides, Lakhan Deb, the Indian playwright, composed his two-act verse play *Murder at the Prayer Meeting* which depicts Mahatma Gandhi’s last days. It seems that the whole play is modelled on Eliot’s *Murder in the Cathedral*. The play *Murder at the Prayer Meeting* deals with the assassination of Mahatma Gandhi. However, in these plays, the characters, Thomas Becket, Mahatma Gandhi and King Thirumala are martyrs who oblige to their ideals and finally meet death without fear.

Besides, one can find the same struggle in the reign of King Henry VIII in the history of England. He wants to get rid of his first wife, Catherine of Aragon, because she couldn't produce a male child as his successor. He wants to marry Anne Boleyn. However, a divorce was a difficult issue and it was not allowed in Roman Catholic Church of Rome. King Henry VIII was a Roman Catholic. The Roman Catholic Church kept the people under its control. It was the difficult situation for King Henry VIII. Being the King of England, he kept his demand of divorce and re-marriage before the Roman Catholic Church of Rome. The Pope of the Roman Catholic Church refused this demand. In anger, King Henry VIII ordered Archbishop of Canterbury granting him permission for divorce and re-marriage. Eventually, the Archbishop granted this divorce. This historical event broke the norms of the Roman Catholic Church. Further, King Henry VIII positioned himself as the head of the Church. In this way, he became the authority of the Church. He started to use Roman Catholic Church as a source of revenue. He took charges for every activity. In 1534, by the Act of Parliament, King Henry VIII had become the Supreme Head of the Church. The country was still Catholic but the power of the Pope came to an end. In this way, King Henry VIII established the Anglican Church contrary to the Papal supremacy of Rome.

In India, Chanakya was the advisor of Chandragupta Maurya. Chanakya wrote *Arthshastra*, an ancient political treatise. He is precursor of political science and economics in India. He played an important role in the establishment of the Maurya Empire. In *Arthshastra*, he is concerned with the safety and security of the State against the inside and outside threats. He asserts that the goal of the King and his government is the welfare of his subjects. Moreover, Plato, the great Greek Philosopher, wrote *Republic*. It is divided in ten books. In Book VIII of *Republic*, he discusses about the five types of regimes. They are Aristocracy, Timocracy, Oligarchy, Democracy and Tyranny. Plato believed that aristocracy is the best form of government. According to him, aristocracy is a kind of government ruled by philosopher king. It is a just government. The ruler has to be best at war and philosophy. He should give priority to excellence, education and equality. It is dominated by wisdom.

Subsequently, Dr R. T. Bedre's play *Thirumal Naickeris* based on historical events from India. The central theme of the play is the conflict between Aristocracy and Theocracy. He tries to depict the supremacy of one over the other. It seems that the playwright is influenced by the malpractices at religious places of all the times. Finally, we are compelled to note that Dr Bedre has become successful in depicting ancient history in the modern world. The play *Thirumal Naicker* is bound to deserve uniqueness in the contemporary Indian literature.

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