

Past as Present in Public Sphere : Sculptor's Interpretation of a Historical Persona

The paper offers a fresh interpretation of Pazhassi Raja, one of Balan Tanur's most enduring sculptures at the historic Pazhassi Raja Memorial Park, near Kannur in Kerala. Challenging widely held assumptions about art in Kerala, the paper maintains that the sculptor critiqued conventional notions about intertextuality in art and public domain.

Art, is primarily concerned with the aesthetic appeal as well as the sculptural description of the uses and functions. Though the historical evolution of art forms, including sculptural forms, has been a subject of sustained research; the Art historian's access to information relating to use and institutional context was not made extensively. Thus hardly any effort has been made to understand the work of art and the social circumstances surrounding a creation, its use and function.

Tanur's installation of the sculpture and stucco relief works of Pazhassi Raja can be called his reinvention of himself as the larger-than-life Tanur who entertains and edifies an immense viewership. In the process, Tanur topples the "binary oppositions", which characterize Western thought: essence versus appearance, speech versus writing, and authenticity versus performance. He exposes a metaphysical debate in the conflicts between an art historian and an artist that repeats itself in his work in the public sphere.

A concept in continental philosophy and critical theory the public sphere contrasts with the private sphere and is the part of life in which one is interacting with others and with society at large. Much of the thought about the public sphere relates to the concept of identity and identity politics. In this the following questions can be raised about Tanur's work:

- What does it mean for an object of history 'to be itself in Art'?
- What is its relevance to the present times?
- How does a historical figure become a part of present life through which the artist interacts with others and with society at large?

In order to answer these questions one needs to understand who is Pazasshi Raja, his role in history and its significance in the present. Pazhassi Raja belonged to the royal family of Kottayam in Kerala in the late 17th century. In the East India Company records, it is stated that Pazhassi formerly was a strong supporter of the Company against Tipu Sultan. During the military campaigns of Tipu Sultan, the Pazhassi Raja organised resistance against the invading armies with the assistance of the English. But after the termination of the Third Anglo-Mysore war, when the Malabar Rajas including Kottayam came under the British authority, Pazhassi openly revolted against the Company.

He was unhappy that the Company had neglected his claim to Kottayam and the Malabar Commission appointed by the Company imposed an unpopular revenue policy that was a heavy burden on the agrarian classes. This was followed by fierce and internecine encounters between the two, following which the British tried to capture him.

Early in 1801, Colonel Stevenson made an effort to cut off Pazhassi Raja from his adherents in South Malabar and by May 1801 the British troops had made much headway. With almost the whole of the Ghats in British hands, Pazhassi Raja was forced to wander in the jungles along with his wife and immediate attendants.

On May 24, 1804, Colonel Macleod issued a proclamation, warning people that they would be treated as rebels if they failed to furnish information about rebel movements and if they helped the Pazhassi's troops with arms, ammunition or provisions.

Finally on November 30, 1805, the Raja was shot dead when T.H.Baber, Sub-Collector, Northern Division, Malabar, took direct charge of the operations. His body was cremated with "customary honours".

Historians in their works have often tried to show that Pazhassi's revolts were for the peasants whose economic

interests were adversely affected due to the policies of the Company. But in the last few years, a serious effort has been made by historians to project Pazhassi Raja as Hindutva's cult figures: These historians believe that Pazhassi Raja was a freedom fighter and his heroic deeds played a major role in the nationalist movement in the country.¹

The most popular and oldest written historical source of the life and times of this famous ruler of Kerala is the accounts of William Logan's Malabar manual, which was written when he was the Collector of Malabar region. In a long and exhaustive narrative about the rule and "misdeeds" of "Palassi (Pychy) Raja"(as he calls him), we have very interesting portrait of the king.

The sculptor in Balan was inspired by the life of the Raja in exile in the jungles of Wayanad. As Logan narrates, "... with every post both above and below the Ghats held by British troops and the whole country disarmed, the Palassi (Pychy) Raja became a wanderer in the jungles ..."² Then as the representative of the Empire in Malabar, Logan faithfully sketches the image of Pazhassi as a rebellious chieftain.

Though Balan borrows Pazhassi Raja's image - arm in arm with bow and arrow wielding Kurichiyas - he also makes a

sincere effort is to create a different kind of "memory" in the Pazhassi Memorial Park about this controversial character.

History reveals that because of his refusal to bow to the dictates of the Empire, the rebel chieftain had to flee to the jungles of Wayanad and here he seems to have allied with the tribals, mainly, the Paniyars and Kurichiyas. With them he organized and fought guerrilla war with the British troops, who considered him to be a rebel. But Balan re-interpretes the past through the medium of art and creates a distinct identity of the Raja in public sphere.

In Logan's Manual, the depiction of Pazhassi sharply contrasts with the tribal memory and glorification of the Pazhassi. However, the sculptor takes sides with the local tribes and the current inhabitants of the land where Pazhassi attained martyrdom.

Tanur by involving the local community, successfully blended local myths, history and legend into his landscaping tries to rebuild the valour and heroism of the legendary chieftain, who was also honoured by his assailants. Besides the available historical records, Tanur based his work on extensive research of Pazhassi Raja. He held interviews with many old men and women of the areas in and around Kannur and the areas near the town

