

**CLEON'S MASK AND A FLAMBOYANT COMEDIAN****Narayan Kharade,***Researcher**Department of Marathi, University Of Mumbai***Prof Dr Pushpalata Rajapure - Tapas,***Professor and Ex HOD, Dept of Marathi, University of Mumbai.*

A new comedy by a young upcoming dramatist created a storm at the Dionysus festival in Athens in the year 426 BC. In democratic Athens, such festivals which formed an integral part of Athenian civil life were sponsored by the government. Dionysus festival was one of the most prestigious, with people from outside Athens also flocking to witness the dramatic performances. At the backdrop lay the war which had broken out five years ago, and would go on for twenty two more, between Delian league lead by "Democratic" Athens and Peloponnesian league lead by "traditional" Sparta. The play "Babylonians", presented amid this war situation, not only unleashed a merciless criticism against Cleon, the most powerful politician, but also portrayed Athens' allies in the war as being forlorn slaves of Athens. Although Athens was known for freedom of expression, whether it should prevail over "Demos" was a question, especially in the time of war. Enraged Cleon threatened to sue the players for the contempt of the "Demos" – The People. The name of the dramatist was Aristophanes. He was 24 then. The details of the trial are not extant. In fact, whether it was the dramatist or the producer of the play who was charged and whether the case actually stood before the court of law is a matter of dispute among the scholars. It is undisputable though, that the dramatist survived this state oppression, since he not only continued to write plays but became even more brutal in his attack on Cleon, the charismatic demagogue.



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A glance at Pericles' funeral oration (430 BC) gives an idea of Athenian milieu at the beginning of the war. The speech was delivered, in accord with the legal custom, at the public funeral of the war dead: "...I will speak first of our ancestors, for it is right and seemly that now, when we are lamenting the dead, a tribute should be paid to their memory. There has never been a time when they did not inhabit this land, which by their valor they will have handed down from generation to generation, and we have received from them a free state. But if they were worthy of praise, still more were our fathers, who added to their inheritance, and after many a struggle transmitted to us, their sons, this great empire... Our form of government does not enter into rivalry with the institutions of others. Our government



does not copy our neighbors', but is an example to them. It is true that we are called a democracy, for the administration is in the hands of the many, and not of the few. But while there exists equal justice to all and alike in their private disputes, the claim of excellence is also recognized; and when a citizen is in any way distinguished, he is preferred to the public service, not as a matter of privilege but as the reward of merit. Neither is poverty an obstacle, but a man may benefit his country whatever the obscurity of his condition. There is no exclusiveness in our public life, and in our private business we are not suspicious of one another, nor angry with our neighbor if he does what he likes...."1

This certainly cannot be taken as a realistic view of Athens. However, it does give an idea of how Athenian ruling class wanted Athens to be known.

Cleon emerged on Athens' political horizon as an aggressive leader and a stringent critique of Pericles. He accused Pericles of corruption. It appears that the allegations were not far from reality. However, with profound influence on Athens politics, Pericles managed to overcome the political loss. He was known as a leader who strengthened democracy, despite coming from an aristocratic family. Numerous structures that symbolized Athens' glory were built during his regime. Cleon was the son of a leather merchant and tanner and the first prominent voice of the trader class in Athenian politics. He damned Pericles for not being aggressive enough on the warfront and proposed a more aggressive policy. He rose to the highest political position following the death of Pericles in 429 BC.

Little is known about Aristophanes' (born 450 BC) personal life, and what we know is mainly from his own plays. Aristophanes appears in Plato's SYMPOSIUM as one of the participants. Plato notes that it was Aristophanes' play 'The Clouds' that lead to the trial which ultimately culminated in capital punishment for Socrates. Aristophanes wrote his first play, namely 'Banqueters', in 427 BC. The extant pieces suggest that it was a satire on the educational and ethical ideas prevailing in Athens at the time. 'Babylonians', his second play (426 BC), earned him the wrath of the state. This play was followed by ACHARNIANS which was again a comedy denouncing war. It brings out the suffering inflicted upon the common Athenians by the war. The plight of the people and general longing for peace finds expression in the words of Dicaeopolis, the protagonist, a farmer, who has come to attend the Assembly: "Oh Athens! Athens! As for myself, I do not fail to come here before all the rest, and now, finding myself alone, I groan, yawn, stretch, fart, and know not what to do; I make sketches in the dust, pull out my loose hairs, muse, think of my fields, long for peace, curse town life and regret my dear country home, which never told me to "buy fuel, vinegar or oil"; there the word "buy", which cuts me in two, was unknown; I harvested everything at will. Therefore I have come to the assembly fully prepared to bawl, interrupt and abuse the speakers, if they talk of anything but peace."2 Disgusted with the war, he makes a private peace treaty with Sparta. Lamachus, Cleon's commander, tries in vain to obstruct him. Lamachus' men chase him attempting to lynch him for being a "traitor" – a common accusation against political rivals in those days. In the end, the wounded Lamachus is juxtaposed with Dicaeopolis, the farmer, who "on the other hand, covers his table with a thousand dishes, proud of his good fortunes"3 and is merrily enjoying food, wine and sex.

Aristophanes wrote his plays mainly in the time of war, and unsurprisingly war comes as one of the most disturbing political evils in his plays; the other repeatedly discussed issue being the Man leading the war – Cleon. Aristophanes' plays portray Cleon as a liar, a corrupt politician, an idiot, a ruthless murderer and a warmonger.



In Acharnians, Aristophanes refers to the harassment he was subjected to by Cleon following 'Babylonians' in the following words – "I know their weakness; they only seek to overwhelm the accused with their votes. Nor have I forgotten how Cleon treated me because of my comedy last year; he dragged me before the Senate and there he uttered endless slanders against me; it was a tempest of abuse, a deluge of lies. Through what a slough of mud he dragged me! I almost perished."⁴

However, Aristophanes does not confine himself to narrating his plight. He promises to peel Cleon's skin and make shoes for the soldiers out of it. He fulfilled this promise to the audience in his next play, THE KNIGHTS. The play faced an unusual difficulty in its performance. In the ancient Greek theatre, the actors would wear masks so as to make the 'face' of the character clearly visible to the huge crowd watching the play. One of the characters in this play is 'Cleon'. However, no mask-maker dared to make Cleon's mask for the play out of fear of persecution; although this could not deter the performers. Referring to this difficulty, Demosthenes, a character personifying Demos, asks the frightened sausage seller – Cleon's rival - just before the entry of Cleon "You will have a thousand brave Knights, who detest him, on your side; also the honest citizens amongst the spectators, those who are men of brave hearts, and finally myself and the god. Fear not, you will not see his features, for none have dared to make a mask resembling him. But the public have wit enough to recognize him."⁵

The plot sets the stage for a contest between Cleon and the sausage seller who has been predicted by the Oracles as being destined to rule Athens. The sausage seller challenges Cleon who is being chased by the knights (of Chorus) for manipulating the legal system for his personal interests. A screaming contest unfolds wherein both the contestants exhibit their screaming skills to prove their competency as orators. That debate was an integral part of Athenian life is suggested in the above mentioned speech by Pericles. Plays by Aristophanes also employ 'debate' as an important dramatic tool. However, unlike Pericles, Aristophanes does not glorify oratory which had become a prerequisite for successful public life in Athens, but exposes how it had become a tool for misleading the masses. Cleon too was known for his fiery oratory. Aristophanes ridicules his oratory. This view of Aristophanes is in accord with that of Aristotle who describes Cleon as the first Athenian leader to scream and use abusive language on a public platform. This diatribe against Cleon is at the same time a dissection of the very democratic set up that produces demagogues like him. Demosthenes' words of 'wisdom' to the sausage seller speak volumes about how the state actually functioned in the name of Democracy – "continue your trade. Mix and knead together all the state business as you do for your sausages. To win the people, always cook them some savoury that pleases them. Besides, you possess all the attributes of a demagogue; a screeching, horrible voice, a perverse, cross-grained nature and the language of the market-place. In you all is united which is needful for governing. The oracles are in your favour, even including that of Delphi. Come. Take a chaplet, offer a libation to the god of stupidity..."⁶

Aristophanes also accuses Cleon of using war to shield himself against the wrath of the citizens. The sausage seller accuses Cleon – "... you wish the war to conceal your rogueries as in a mist, that Demos (*The People*) may see nothing of them, and harassed by cares, may only depend on yourself for his bread. But if ever peace is restored to him, if ever he returns to his lands to comfort himself once more with good cakes, to greet his cherished olives, he will know the blessings you have kept him out of, even though paying him a salary; and, filled with hatred and rage, he will rise, burning with desire to vote against you. You know this only too well; it is for this you rock him to sleep with your lies."⁷



It has been argued that Aristophanes' portrayal of Cleon is marred by prejudice and hence one sided. For example, Aristophanes accuses him of defrauding public fund. The other records of the time do not offer any evidence for this charge. However, the fact that corruption had become commonplace in Greek democracy, makes it hard to believe that Cleon was clean. As far as his brutal nature is concerned, there can hardly be any doubt about that. He ordered the massacre of all the men of Mytilene after crushing an uprising. The order was withdrawn the next day, thanks to the opposition by the other senate members. Nevertheless, 1000 men were executed. Historian Thucydides describes Cleon as the most violent Athenian.

Athens saw an increase in spying and surveillance under Cleon. Accusing rivals of treason became a commonplace. In *THE KNIGHTS*, Cleon accuses his political rival 'the sausage seller' of gulping the stew sent for the Athenian fleet in Sparta and of joining hands with the enemies of Athens. Casting doubt on the Athenian roots of the rivals had also become a common practice. It is noteworthy that the Citizenship law passed in the year 450 BC, popularly known as Pericles Citizenship Law, had restricted the citizenship of Athens to those born from both Athenian citizen parents. Slavery and subjugation of womanhood was an integral part of Athenian Democracy. Slaves and women were deprived of political rights. In this particular context, the plays by Aristophanes could be seen exploiting the dramatic liberty in performance to invoke an "on stage freedom" which is absent in reality. For example, The slaves of 'THE KNIGHTS' steal the oracles. In the play *LYSISTRATA*, the women in Athens go on a sex strike, under the leadership of Lysistrata as a mark of protest against the warring men. The women pledge not to give any sexual pleasures to their men until peace is restored and ultimately compel the men to put the weapons down. Women capturing the Acropolis which holds the state treasury is an example of how Aristophanes uses the stage to redefine freedom and reassess reality. It has been argued that Aristophanes' opposition to war is not inspired by the virtue of peace but by Athens' bad performance on the battlefield. It is noteworthy that, in the play *LYSISTRATA*, women of Athens join hands with those of Sparta to form a pan Greece alliance for restoration peace.

While the Greek tragedy tends to be well knit, the old comedy, on the other hand, is loosely weaved. It is marked by wild imagination, cheerful obscenity, sharp commentary on contemporary socio-political matters and devastating ridicule of leading public figures. Mythological characters, characters from the plays of contemporary playwrights, the playwrights as characters, characters based on public figures or explicitly real life characters, personified objects, birds or animals are all set against each other to create a playful performance aiming at a serious artistic intervention in public life. Aristophanes' plays also give a clear insight into the playwright's perception of the role of theatre in society. He believes the common audience to be an enlightened critique. He goes on to say... "Spectators, be not angered if, although I am a beggar, I dare in comedy to speak before the people of Athens of the public weal; even comedy can sometimes discern what is right. I shall not please, but I shall say what is true."⁸ For Aristophanes, theatre is not only an institution to discuss the concrete living questions before the society, but he also offers to encourage the audience to change the problematic reality for a wider good. This desire to inspire the masses is reflected in several lines. For example, these lines of the chorus in *THE KNIGHTS* referring to Cleon – "At Athens we have something more fiery than fire, more impudent than impudence itself! 'Tis a grave matter; come, we will push and jostle him without mercy. There, you grip him tightly under the arms; if he gives way at the onset, you will find him nothing but a craven..."⁹



Eleven of his plays that are extant in whole are not only sources of valuable information for historians, but are often performed in translations and adaptations. The major reason behind this undying appeal is the sharp and witty criticism of democracy as a system that forms the core of Aristophanes' plays. For example, the very name of the crooked 'Jury' in THE WASPS is 'Phylocleon' suggesting his affinity with Cleon. It is noteworthy that Cleon had introduced remuneration for the Jury in Athens, thereby gaining control over the Judiciary. Although Athens was a society divided into classes, the tribal life was not a distant history yet. The ethos of tribal life still lingered in the Greek memory. It is this immediate past which forms the basis for Aristophanic criticism of Democracy. Perhaps, the tussle between the fast dying communist spirit of the tribal life and the new emerging democracy lead by traders in a city state is the fundamental conflict underlying his plays.

It will not be an exaggeration to state that Aristophanes used the "Brechtian hammer" in the ancient Greek world, 2300 years prior to Bertolt Brecht's birth. In fact, one is tempted to draw parallels between the two pairs – Hitler and Brecht in the nineteenth century Germany and Cleon and Aristophanes in fifth century BC Athens. Though Aristophanes had to pay the price for his flamboyance, there is little doubt that time proved him right. Cleon himself was killed in the war in 412 BC meeting a fate worse than Lamachus' in THE ACHARNIANS. When the war ended in the defeat of Athens in 404 BC, Aristophanes was still alive. When he was born, Athens was at the height of glory. When the war ended, Athenian glory had been a part of history. Aristophanes' plays are documentations of that downfall, and at the same time, a warning for future generations against the tendency of Democracy to turn into a tyranny.

Reference -

1. Pericles Funeral Oration (Translation by Richard Hooker)
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