

Lexical Analysis of Sinhala Sandeśa Kāvya for Understanding Cultural and Social Dynamics in the Kotte Period

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Introduction

The Sandeśa Kāvya, or message poems, are a distinctive form of classical Sinhala poetry that flourished in the 15th-century Kotte period. Noted for their artistic quality, these works blend language, culture, and social commentary, providing valuable insights into the era's religious, monarchical, and social structures. The poems depict birds delivering messages to deities or royal figures, symbolizing the deep connection between religion, monarchy, and society. Through lexical analysis, these texts reveal details about religious practices, royal authority, social hierarchy, gender roles, and the importance of nature in 15th-century Sri Lanka.

Objective

The main objective of this research is to examine how a lexical study of Sandeśa kāvyas helps understand the life-style of the people of the Kotte Period.

Methodology

This research mainly depends on a literary survey and lexical analysis. The data for this research have been collected from both primary and secondary data. Message poems (Sandeśa Kāvya) will be utilized as primary sources. The researcher utilizes other relevant books and articles as secondary sources.

Results and Discussion

During the Kotte period, Buddhism was integral to the socio-political framework, deeply influencing Sandeśa Kāvya. These poems are rich in religious language and themes, reflecting the people's piety and devotion to Buddhist teachings. Key terms such as “buddha”, “dharma”, and “sangha” underscore the prominence of the Triple Gems and the core values of Buddhism, illustrating the spiritual aspiration and devotion of the era.

The lexical choices in Sandeśa Kāvya, such as “mettā” (loving-kindness), “mudithā” (sympathetic joy), “Upekkhā” (equanimity) and “nibbāna”

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(enlightenment) reflect the ethical and spiritual values of the Kotte period, shaped by Buddhist doctrine. The poems frequently describe pilgrimages to sacred sites with detailed references to rituals and offerings. Terms like “vihāra” (temple), “Bodhi” (Bodhi tree) and “chaitya” (stupa) underscore the significance of temples as religious and community hubs. Words such as “pujā” (offering) “buddhapujā” (offering to the Buddha) and “sīla” (moral conduct) highlight the importance of offerings and moral discipline in sustaining spiritual devotion.

In addition to Buddhist vocabulary, Sandeśa Kāvya also includes references to Hindu deities. Terms like “Upulvan dēva, Vibīṣaṇa dēva” and “dēvālaya” (temple of the god) point to the syncretic nature of religious practices during the Kotte period, where Buddhism and elements of Hinduism coexisted in the worship of local deities.

In the Kotte period, the king held a dual role as both political leader and religious patron, a status reflected in the lexicon of Sandeśa Kāvya. Titles like “raja” (king), “adipathi” (lord) and “vīra” (heroic) idealized the king as the protector of land, people, and Buddhism. Terms such as “dēsa” (land) “nagara” (city) highlight the structured political organization and the role of geography in administering power across the kingdom.

The royal court is depicted as a place of culture, power, and protection, further underscoring the king’s role as a cultural parton. The poems make use of the words such as “rajya” (kindom), “mandira” (palace), and “perahera” (royal procession) to illustrate the splendor of royal life and the material wealth associated with the monarchy. The poetic descriptions of opulence in the court provide insight into the elite lifestyle, which was marked by luxury, pageantry, and patronage of the arts.

In Sandeśa Kāvya, birds’ journeys symbolize pilgrimage, reflecting the religious devotion of the period. Terms like “yāthrā” (pilgrimage) underscore the spiritual value of travel to sacred sites. The act of sending messages, represented by birds, also highlights diplomacy, with words like “Sandeśa ” (message) and “maga” (path) emphasizing formal royal communication and the importance of both spiritual and political connections in the Kotte period.

The Sandeśa Kāvya lexicon highlights the agrarian foundation of Kotte society, with terms like “goviyā” (farmer), “kamkaru” (laborer), “kubal” (potter) “āchārī” (artisan) indicating various social classes engaged in agriculture and crafts. References to “wela” (paddy field), “wewa” (reservoir) “gama” (village), and “niwasa” (house) underscore the reliance on land and water management, while “Kammala” (workshop) reflects the value of skilled labor and craftsmanship in the economy.

In Sandeśa Kāvya, women are portrayed in idealized terms, emphasizing beauty, purity, and grace, reflecting the gender norms of the Kotte period. The lexicon highlights a patriarch society where women are primarily associated with beauty, motherhood, and supporting male protagonists, terms like “kumari” (princess), “tharu” (stars) “siri” (radiance), “kanyā” (maiden), “subhā” (graceful) focus on aesthetic qualities, suggesting that women are viewed primarily through the lens of ideal feminine beauty and their roles within the social hierarchy.

Women are often represented in nurturing roles or as muses for the male protagonists. Words like “mātā” (mother) “sīlavatī” (virtuous woman) and “kula kanyā” (noble maiden) reflect the traditional role of women as caretakers and paragons of morality. These terms point to the expectation that women would uphold the family’s honor through their chastity and moral conduct.

A key feature of Sandeśa Kāvya is its rich depiction of the natural environment, particularly birds, animals, trees, and rivers, which reflect both religious symbolism and everyday life. This connection underscores the relationship between people and their environment during the Kotte period. Nature-related vocabulary reveals its symbolic importance, serving as a mirror for human emotions and spiritual journeys. Words like “hamsa” (swan), “girā” (parrot) and “mayura” (peacock) depict birds as literal messengers, symbolizing grace, wisdom, beauty, royalty, and devotion, highlighting the belief in the interconnectedness of nature and humanity.

A detailed description of flora and fauna, such as “nā mala” (ironwood flowers), “nelum” (lotus) and “æsala” (cassia), “bo” (Bodhi tree), and “kiri” (Milk), often symbolizing purity) evoke the rich biodiversity of Sri Lanka and highlight the richness of the natural landscape, indicating the importance of nature in the cultural and religious consciousness for time and reflect the reverence for nature that was part of both Buddhist Philosophy and daily life. The lexicon suggests that nature was both a source of beauty and a symbol of spiritual purity during the Kotte period.

The poems reflect the cultural richness of the Kotte period. The lexicon of Sandeśa Kāvya reflects this cultural vibrancy, with references to artistic expressions and celebrations that were integral to Buddhism, the monarchy and the local environment. Sandesa Kāvya in Kotte period such as Paravi Sandeśaya, Sælalihini Sandeśaya, Girā Sandeśaya, Hamsa Sandeśaya and Kokila Sandeśaya often featured characters like birds delivering messages to sacred sites, such as temples or shrines. The lexicon used to describe these events sheds light on the natural environment, religious spaces and local landscapes provides a sense of the collective cultural consciousness. The use of terms like “Perahera” (procession)

and “upahāra” (offering) “buddhapūjā” (Buddha offering) reflects the religious festivals and community events in Kotte society. These festivals were often elaborate, involving processions, music, and dance, and played a significant role in the religious and social life of the time.

Words such as “vadiya” (musical instrument), “nartana” (dance) and “gāthā” (song) illustrate the importance of music and dance in cultural and religious ceremonies. Music and dance were integral to both religious ceremonies and royal entertainment, reflecting the sophisticated cultural milieu of the Kotte court. These art forms were supported and patronized by the monarchy.

Conclusion

A lexical analysis of Sandeśa Kāvya written in the Kotte period provides valuable insights into the cultural and social dynamics of that period. The language of the poem reflects the central role of Buddhist religious values, the central role of the monarchy, the hierarchical structure of the society, cultural identity, gender norms and the relationship between people and their environment. The poem’s lexicons illustrate how the people of the Kotte kingdom navigated their roles within realities. By studying the language used in these poetic works, we not only gain a deeper understanding of the aesthetic and literary qualities of the Sandeśa Kāvya tradition but also it provides deeper insights into the values and dynamics that shaped the Kotte society.

Keywords: Kotte Period, Lexical Analysis, Sinhala Sandeśa Kāvya, Cultural Dynamics, Social Dynamics

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