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The stotra - A literary form

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1. The Glory of Sanskrit Literature

The Classical Sanskrit literature has inherited the spirit of the Vedas. Almost all the literary forms of classical period have been greatly inspired by the earlier literature existent in assuming new external forms. The epics have played a greater role of transmission by bringing down the ideal content of the Vedas and the Upanishads in the form of genealogical accounts of the rulers of both Solar and Lunar races. While the depiction of an ideal man has assumed the shape of the first poetic piece in the world (adikavya) in the name of Ramayana, the day today conflicts between the vice and virtue took the shape of the Mahabharata. The stress on moral teachings in the latter lead it to reckon as the fifth Veda (pancamaveda). The appealing technique of expression kindled the inquisitive and creative faculty of the man to give expression to their own feelings and ideas. The creator (poet) in man gave verbal expressions to abstract ideas and visible nature leading to the creation of poetry (kavya). Mammata succinctly expresses in a nutshell the effectiveness of the poetry (kavya) in the following lines- "Kavya is that which touches the in most cords of the human mind and diffuses itself into the crevices of the heart working up a lasting sense of delight. It is an expression in the beautiful form and melodious language of the best thought and noblest emotion, which is the spectacle of life awakening the finest souls"¹

2. The Classification of Kavya

The kavya of classical Sanskrit broadly divided into to two kinds: 1. drsyakavya (Visible) and sravyakavya (audible) when the first one includes all the ten forms of rupakas like Nataka etc, the latter is further divided into prose (gadya), poetry (padya) and the mixture of the both (campu)² The padyakavya is sub divided into mahakavya and khandakavya or laghukavya

A mahakavya, which characterized by all the rhetoricians is a work of considerable length, varying descriptions and elaborate constructions embodying a narrative, the logical or historical and divided into sargas or cantos for convenience of narration³

The Khandakavya or laghukavya (minor poems) is nor clearly defined by any rhetorician but it is understood that, a poem that falls short of the several particulars required to make a mahakavya is called laghukavya. These laghukavyas can rightly translated in to English as the lyrics which is an expression of a feeling or a thought or a sentiment either of love or of devotion and exposes the human heart of a poet to the hearts of connoisseurs on account of its emotional impact. Its convinience to sing in the accompaniment of a musical instrument (geyata) also sounds the expression Lyric. The Sanskrit lyrics have evoked universal admiration and even Indian dramas owe part to their beauty of their lyrical elegance.

The Western as well as the modern scholars are of the opinion that 'Lyric is oldest Indian poetical composition known to the world'. The Hymns tot the gods, the sacrificial and magical songs of the Veda are the extant Indian poetical compositions. Although the Vedas are essentially religious, we find in them considerable amount of secular leanings. As regards the general nature of lyric poetry, it may consist of detached single verses (gathaslokas), on one hand and on the other, the khandakavyas are more organized lyrics of various lengths.

3. Types of Lyrics

On the basis of the theme of the compositions, the minor poems can be divided into four types.

1. Romantic or erotic lyrics, 2. Imitative or satire poems, 3. Gnostic and didactic poems and

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4. Devotional poems. All the sandesakavyas starting from the Meghasandesa and srngarasatakas of Bhartrhari and Amaru come under the romantic lyrics. The works like the Kuttinimata of Damodaragupta, the Desopodesa of Ksemendra, Kalividambana of Nilakantha Diksita represent the satirical poems. The Niti and Vairagyasatakas of Bhartrhari, the Mohamudgara of Sankaracharya are the classical examples of Gnostic and didactic poems. It is opined that Indians have not attained such a perfect mastery in any sphere as in gnostic poetry. The Syamaladandaka attributed to kalidasa, the Saundaryalahari etc of Sri Sankaracharya represent the devotional poems (stotras). The number of devotional lyrics in Sanskrit is so large that it is very difficult even of mention the name of the important ones.

The stotras form part of the kavya genre of classical literature. The origin of stotras has a greater antiquity as the very Vedic hymns are nothing but the devotional lyrics of Vedic deities and natural phenomena. During the classical period these Vedic hymns have developed a high degree of skill and poetic merit and continue to flourish in two channels viz. emotional and devotional. They apart from emerging as two separate independent branches of literary forms by name srngarakavyas and storakavyas at times they have so closely mixed that it is highly difficult to separate them from one another. The cultivation of devotional compositions continued to present day uninterrupted since centuries. V. Raghavan points out that "a noteworthy part of this Sanskrit literature of modern times following the traditional patters is that of stotras, devotional lyrics."1

4. Stotra Sabda Vyutpattih

The terms like stotra, stuti, and stava have derived from the root 'stu' to praise or eulogize with suffixes like 'stun', 'lyap' and 'ktin' respectively (Sabdakalpadruma- V- p. 433). Meaning glorification, commendation, laudation, invocation of a deity in question.

The stotras in Sanskrit, set a strong trend with their devotional fervor as well as variety of form. Sanskrit continues to be the medium through which the devotee pours out his heart or appeals to his favorite deity.

A large number of hymns addressed to Surya, Vishnu, Durga, Rama, Siva and other deities, found in the puranas, tantras etc. have inspired the votaries to compose independent stotras which are wholly philosophical particularly containing the doctrines of Vedanta. It is difficult to distinguish these lyrics whether they can be included in the puranas or among the philosophical texts in ornate poetry. Side by side invocations to and names of gods appear as expression of a deep religious ardor. There occur numerous ornate poems in which the most difficult meters and all devices of poetics have come into play.

5. Different Types of Stotras

The hymnologists (stotra Kara's) have tried in almost all the stotra types known in Sanskrit literature of the classical and mediaeval times. Various kinds of stotras have come into existence, which can be broadly divided into two kinds on the basis of poetics and philosophy.

The stotras of poetic importance include the number of verses a stotra consists of and the meter in which it is composed. Though the deity, the object of veneration is different from voteree to voteree, the name of the stotra remains intact. For instance - Pancaka,

Pancaratanas, pancastavis are Stotras consisting of five verses, Satpadis, Satakas are Stotras of seven verses, Navamanimalas,

and Navartnamalas are of nine verses, Dasaka of ten verses, Naksatramalas of twenty one verses Pancadasis of fifty verses and Sataka of one hundred verses and Astottara Sataka of 108 verses. Along with the prominent deities of Hindu galaxy, the local and regional deities are have become the themes of many stotras. There are some Aksaramalikastotras in which the name of the deity or the esoteric formula (Mantra) can be read vertically, from the first letters of each line.

6. The Usase of Alankaras in Stotras

There are Vrthamalikastotras in which all the metres are employed and the names of the mitres cleverly used by slesa particularly the metres like Slesa, Bhujangaprayata, Arya are very favorable metres to the stotra composers.

Some stotras namely Akaradiksakaranta addressed to a particular deity are found in which all the alphabets starting from 'a' to 'ksa' can be vertically red as each line of the stotra, sometimes the first letter of all the four Padas of a verse commences with an alphabet letter. Thus it contains more than fifty five lines or verses in total. These stotras invariably planked with an introduction furnishing the context along with rsi, candas, etc. and a conclusion or phalasaruti where the particulars of the rewards one would attain as the fruit of the recitation of the stotra. The strings of divine names consisting one thousand names are in vogue in the name of a sahasranama stotra.

Apart from these there are compositions where suddhalankaras like prasa and astaprasas citrabandhas dandakas are effectively used to exhibit the poetic skill of the devotee. In some hymns the poets used to manage different designs like Torana (Festoon) Candra (moon) and Muraja (drum). And lastly highly difficult anuloma-viloma stotra, whether they are read normally or in the reverse order, the text will be same. Some have composed nirosthyastotras which avoids completely the labial sounds.

The Founders of three Vedanta schools viz. Advaita, Visistadvaita, and Dvaita, and their successors have richly contributed to the stotra literature. Though the underlying doctrine may be different as for as the presiding deity of the each system is concerned, all Acaryaas.

7. The Worship of Devi

The literature that deals with the worship of Devi is very vast, as it includes mythological and ritualistic texts like puranas, upapuranas and Sakta- Agamas etc. The Saktism, where the Goddess Devi is Considered as the Ultimate Reality and Supreme Being, grew on par with the other two major religious sects namely Saivism and Vaisnavism, When the Saivism and Vaisnavism have favoured a kind of pacific or moderate mode of worship in their approach to propitiate their respective gods, the Saktism has inclined to adopt a kind of extreme or esoteric mode of worship. Whatever may be the method one adopts to obtain the grace of his 'Istadevata' at the outset, the worship is of two types viz. One the external worship (Saguna) and the other being internal worship (nirguna). Both are aim at making same kind of effect upon the deity and to have communication with it. It is clear that the 'Saguna' worship is the means to the goal of achieving the identity with the Supreme Being in the final stage.

8. The Methods of Worship

Again the literature woven around the worship of Devi refers to various methods of approach to win over the grace of the mother goddess. The Tantric worship is known for its peculiar practices involving pancamakaras. In general some texts point

out the moderate approach of worship. Here Goddess Devi is worshipped through a number of means like 'Idol, Yantra, Mantra, Dhyana, Japa, stotra, purascarana, Hridaya Kavaca, Panjara etc.

In this process though the stress is more on the external worship in the beginning ultimately it culminates in the internal worship. In order to cross physical level and to reach the transcendental level this process is inevitable to the seeker. It lead the people to evolve many kinds of devotion as a positive - tool to the path of realization of his objective.

Conclusion

The term 'stotra' derived from the root 'stu' to praise or to eulogize means a prayer that enlists the qualities and characteristics qualities of a deity. As there is no limit neither to the qualities nor to the number or the length of verses.

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