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Adoption of novel themes in modern Sanskrit literature: Contribution of Bengal

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Abstract

The literature composed in Sanskrit of early and medieval periods dealt mainly with the values and spirituality latent in mankind through a projection of universal outlook. But from nineteenth century onwards the scenario changed and the creative intellectuals from different parts of India started searching for new themes from the vast canvas of old and contemporary history. A great number of the erudite community of Bengal also, have adopted novel and unique topics as the themes and composed their ingenious pieces.

Keywords: Bengal, literature, Sanskrit

1. Introduction

Sanskrit is one of the oldest living languages of the world. This language is widely known for both its antiquity and its continuity through various phases of Indian civilization. The literature composed in Sanskrit of early and medieval periods deal mainly with the values and spirituality latent in mankind through a projection of universal outlook. But from nineteenth century onwards the scenario changed and the creative intellectuals from different parts of India, freed from the shackles of this tradition, started searching for new themes from the vast canvas of old and contemporary history. A great number of the erudite community of Bengal also, selected eclectic themes, composed excellent works and we do take pride to state that those scholars have contributed immensely to enrich the modern Sanskrit literature. The present article is to discuss about some of those literary works where the Bengali poets have adopted novel and unique topics as the themes and composed their ingenious pieces. Considering the length of the article, I shall confine myself to five compositions only--

1. Vīyatpatrikā— composed on the paper kites
2. Matkuṇāṣṭakam— composed on the bedbugs
3. Sārameyadaśakam— composed on the dogs
4. Nāryo vyaṃ navayugasya— composed on the women emancipation
5. Modakotpatih— composed on the origin of sweetmeats

2. Vīyatpatrikā

Sri Pulin Behari Dasgupta composed a surrealist piece of work on an inanimate object, the paper kites, titled 'Vīyatpatrikā'. This poetry was published in the 92nd issue of Sanskrit Sahitya Parishat journal.

The poet imagined the kites as a group of delighted damsels—"yā phullā yuvaṭī vadhūriṇī ciraṃ cāncalyalīlāncitā". The kites are of different colours such as white, blue, yellow, red and of various shapes like circular, square, rectangular, triangular, oval and so on. Sometimes the kites seem like beautiful paintings drawn on the blue canvas of the vast sky, sometimes they appear as swift airplanes in flight. Fast at times, slow at times -- the undulating pace of these kites inspired the devotee poet to imagine that the kites are getting eager to touch the lotus feet of Lord Viṣṇu— "sūtrāvalambitavigrahā rucimatī viṣṇoḥ śrayantī padam". The poet opines that these kites defeat even the Puṣpaka chariot's incessant association with the clouds—

“ākāśādhvani yāsi phullahṛdaya he patrike sundari
meghān lekṣi sucañcale viharasi prītyai nabhomaṇḍle |

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yānaṃ puṣpakamatra rājasi śubhe nityaṃ vihasyeva
yat
kā syād bhāgyavati varā tvadadhikā māyālaye
saṃsṛtau ||”

The human beings of the world are amazed by this beautiful sight created by these kites.

The poetry consists of nine verses. The spontaneous delineation of the meters like Śārdūlavikrīḍitam, Mandākrāntā and Vasantatilakam is enchanting. The implementation of the figures of speech like Upamā, Atīśayoktiḥ, and Samāsoktiḥ is appropriate and appealing. The suggestive similarity between the kites and the lady love in the first flush of her youth, is novel, unique and fascinating.

3. Matkuṇāṣṭakam

Sri Pulin Behari Dasgupta chose a unique theme yet again in his composition titled ‘Matkuṇāṣṭakam’. This poetry, consisting of eight verses, is written on the behavior and characteristics of the bedbugs. It was published in the year 1927 in the 1st issue of the 10th volume of the Sanskrit Sahitya Parishat journal.

In the first six verses, the poet has humorously depicted the plight of the people afflicted by bedbugs. These bugs are the size of sesame seeds only, but they have sharp stings to penetrate human skin and extract blood. These swift-moving perpetrators hide inside the porous surface of mattresses and torture humans mercilessly—

“bhuñjanā naradehaṣṇitasudhām nityaṃ hi
śayyātale
rājante tilatulyadehasuṣamā yeṣāṃ kṣapāvāsaram |
drṣṭvā vai capalāsamām drutagatiṃ yeṣāṃ narā
nityaśaḥ
śaṃsanti kṣaṇadācarāṃśavibhavāste matkuṇa
viśrutāḥ ||”

The female bugs produce hundreds of little ones at a time and after a few days, they also follow the lead of their predecessors. Because of the suffering caused by these bugs, the irritated people spend restless days and sleepless nights. During hot summer nights, the people toss and turn in bed, scratching their bodies with the fan of a palmyra leaf (tālapatra).

In the concluding two verses the poet praised the bedbugs on a hilarious note. He prayed that the lives of these bloodthirsty bedbugs should not be futile, they should reproduce innumerable and never be extinct —

“nāśaḥ samyak na khalu bhavatānmatkuṇāḥ
ṣṇitāśāḥ
dhanyaṃ janma kṣitiṣu niyamaṃ śreyaso sādhanā
vah||”

This composition deals with the sentiment of mirth in a real witty style. The efficient usage of long meters like Śārdūlavikrīḍitam, Mandākrāntā, Sragdharā etc. also deserves applause from connoisseurs.

4. Sārameyadaśakam

Sri Hemchandra Vyakaranatirtha expressed his admiration blended with a tinge of fear towards the canine species in a humorous way in his composition titled ‘Sārameyadaśakam’. It was published in the 2nd volume of the second year of the Sanskrit Sahitya Parishat journal.

The poet wished that the dogs, with their rows of sharp teeth, horrible howling and wagging tails, would keep a safe distance from him. On a hilarious note, the poet opines that the reverence to Lord Viṣṇu and the worship of Śālagrāmasilā offered by the old fashioned ignorants were absolutely futile as the civilized, intelligent new generation finds these dogs worthy of being worshipped instead of the God—

“prācīnāstu jarāviśīrṇamatayo devatvabudhyāniśam
śālagrāmasilārcanaṃ pratidinaṃ kurvatyaho
mūrkhataḥ |
dhanyā navyatamā viśālamatayarśvarājaśiṣyāḥ khalu
sākṣāddevaramaṃ mahopakaraṇam śvānam
sadārcanti ye ||”

They bathe these dogs with alkaline water (kṣārajala), adorn them with beautiful chains and appease them with the best quality food and every possible personal care. These dogs with their lolling tongues and flaccid ears even share the bed of these young bloods, though they have a full-fledged family of parents, brothers and sisters to live with. The dogs also have classifications. The ‘vailātika’, the foreign breed of dogs, are ranked more esteemed than the mongrels. The poet humorously comments that people who take care of cattle, do that expecting calves from them; but the dog lovers condemn this action, as the service they offer to the dogs is voluntary and absolutely unconditional—

“gosevā khalu vatsavañcanaphalā tannīcakānām
kṛtam
matveti tvarayāpamānabhayatastyaktvā ca tām
yatnataḥ |
pitroḥ samyagupāsanaṃ pravayasorhitvā
tathāvajñayā
śvārcyā tairvahumanyante sumatibhiḥ
śikṣābhīmānānvitaiḥ ||”

The poet ridicules these educated and cultured dog-persons who adore these consumers of every kind of inedible and prohibited food more than their devoted and religious parents. The poet concludes with a pseudo-despair that the lives of these dogs are more valued compared to that of human beings, as it is the dogs who receive the supreme adoration and unconditional affection from the asset of the society, the young people.

Consisting of ten verses, this composition is indeed a great concoction of both humour and reality which enriches the treasure of ludicrous writings in Sanskrit.

5. Nāryo Vayaṃ Navayugasya

Sri Durgadas Goswami expressed his warm admiration towards the proficient and free spirited women of the modern era in an unhesitating manner in his composition titled ‘Nāryo Vayaṃ Navayugasya’. It was published in the Bengali year of 1234 in the Sanskrit Sahitya Parishat journal.

The poet compared the women to the monsoon clouds. There is thunder in their voice and lightning in their eyebrow when they are enraged. However, these are the women who bear the holy sacrificial water in their hearts which can pacify the entire human race—

“varṣodbhavāḥ khalu vayaṃ navameghamālāḥ
śyāmāḥ kṣaṇād dhvanati no’śanireva kaṇṭhe |
vidyucchikhāḥ sphurati naḥ sudṛśoḥ payo’sti
bakṣasyaho! tṛṣṭitabhūmitṛṣopāśaktyai ||”

These women arrive everywhere in the world, be it our homeland or abroad, and make the world more peaceful and prosperous. First, the poet cited examples of empowered women from early Indian literature. In Rāmāyaṇa, Pramīlā played the role of the commander-in-chief during the battle between Rāma and Rāvaṇa. In Mahābhārata, Subhadrā drove Arjuna's chariot. The poet then gazed at the history of medieval India and sang praise of the brave feats of Razia Sultana and Chand Sultana. After this, the poet eulogized the heroic women of the modern era like Rani Durgavati and Rani Lakshmibai with overwhelming admiration. Along with the names from the orient, the poet acclaimed the celebrated women from the occident too. He mentioned the sacred task of nursing undertaken by Florence Nightingale, the sacrifice of Joan of Arc as well as the notable contributions of Madame Curie in the field of radioactivity.

The reverent poet recollected the all-pervasive influence of women on mankind. Women feed their young ones with their breast milk and they light lamps at the base of the sacred 'tulasi' shrub every evening—

“snehāddharāśīsumukhe'mṛtasamarpayāmo
dadhmaḥ pradīpamapi nastulasītale ca ||”

On the other hand, these women are also capable of arousing an uproar that eventually leads to the demolition of thriving cities like Swarna Lanka, Hastinapur and Troy—

“hā dhik! pramohavaśataḥ svayamekadāsmān
hṛtvāvatya ca laghu pralayāgnirāśau |
bhasmāvaśeṣamāgaman kila hemalaṅkā
sā hastinā 'Troy' iti prathitā purī ca ||”

The poet envisages that the forests adorn themselves with numerous flowers to pay homage to women. Even the omnipotent God embellishes the vast expanse of the sky with the Sun, the Moon and innumerable stars to greet them. The poetry consists of twenty-seven verses. The entire work is composed in the Vasantatilaka metre. The excellent usage of the figures of speech like Utprekṣā, Samāśoktiḥ etc. deserves a special mention.

6. Modakotpattiḥ

Sri Nabin Chandra Das collected, compiled and published a composition titled 'Modakotpattiḥ'. Sri Das, resident of North Calcutta of West Bengal, was an owner of a confectionary. He was widely known as a connoisseur of Indian classical music as well as of classical Sanskrit literature. But above all, he was famous for his invention of 'Rasagollā', a special kind of sweetmeat which became extremely popular all over India and abroad. Afterwards he was renowned as 'The Columbus of Rasagollā'. There is a prevalent rumor that Sri Das had to face a good deal of taunt and humiliation for his so-called 'down-market' profession of preparing sweetmeats. Offended and distressed Das went inquisitive about the origin of his own community and as an outcome of a lot of research in this context, he published this composition in the year 1914. Though this is not an original work, but the social and historical significance of this writing has made this a commendable contribution to the modern Sanskrit literature. The amusing story of the invention of sweetmeats ('modaka') as depicted in some editions of Padmapurāṇa's Pātālakhaṇḍa, is narrated in this composition under discussion. At a place situated on the peak of Kailāsa mountain, kept neat and clean by the Gandharvas, Kinnaras and Siddhas, decorated with

hundreds of flowers of various types, sprinkled by the holy water of Mandākinī, Lord Śiva was dwelling with Goddess Pārvatī. One day little Gaṇeśa started crying weltering on the ground. Hundreds of attempts to appease him went in vain. Then a gigantic male appeared from the frame of Lord Śiva and introduced himself as his serf. He then prepared a sweetmeat, gave it to Gaṇeśa and pacified him. Gaṇeśa became cheerful and started dancing. Lord Śiva blessed the man and told that as he pacified Gaṇeśa by the sweetmeats, now on his line of descent would be mentioned as 'modaka' and the sweets prepared by them would be favorite among the deities and the Brahmins.

There is another mention of this sweetmeat-creator on another occasion. During the fierce battle between Paraśurāma and Kārtavīryārjuna, Goddess Bhagavatī became compassionate by the pitiful words of Paraśurāma. She called these serfs and ordered them to descend on earth from Kailāsa and to help him to win the battle. With the assistance of these serfs, Paraśurāma came victorious in that face-off. Later, being instructed by the grateful Paraśurāma, the revered sage Kāśyapa evoked these serfs. He blessed them that they would be renowned as 'modaka', indulge themselves in trade and export their merchandise even by sea-voyages. The addressed person received his blessing with great respect, accepted the profession of a trader and pleased everyone under the Sun with their formulated product—the 'modaka's.

The works in discussion are glimpses of only Bengali contribution in modern Sanskrit literature. If we look at the pan Indian scenario, it is needless to say how the scholars, poets and critics are enriching the modern Sanskrit literature every single day. The poetry composed by Uma Shankar Sharma of Uttar Pradesh is full of social awareness especially about equal rights and privileges. Sridhar Bhaskar Barnekar of Maharashtra promoted Gandhism in his literary works. In his poetry, Ramkaran Sharma of Delhi presented the diverse spiritual and cultural tradition of India. The gifted poet from Uttar Pradesh, Abhiraja Rajendra Mishra, is renowned for his experimental literary cultivation. He introduced the folk metres like 'Kājari', 'Hori' etc. in the Ghazals composed in the Sanskrit language. The legendary scholar Radhaballav Tripathi edited a book titled 'Ṣoḍaśī' where seventy-eight poetries composed by sixteen poets from all over India have been compiled within two covers.

A good number of poets have been greatly influenced by the foreign stylistics and have created marvelous compositions in that style in the Sanskrit language. Professor V. Raghavan of Tamil Nadu has introduced the occidental type of romanticism in his works. M.G. Mainkar of Maharashtra has made us familiar with the 'Eulogy' type of composition. Harshadev Madhav of Gujarat has composed his wonderful poetry following the Japanese style namely, Haiku and Tanka and the Korean style Sijo. Not only individual attempts, even assemblages of august poets of Sanskrit literature are organized in many parts of India.

We conclude with the anticipation that the young generation of modern India will carry the baton of the ancestors and whole heartedly indulge themselves in the cultivation of literature in Sanskrit language as much as possible.

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