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Salient features of ancient sanskrit literature

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Abstract:

'Salient Features of Ancient Sanskrit Literature' – this research paper reflects the basic, the important and the main, but Salient Features of Ancient Sanskrit Literature. Remarkable elasticity, unusual expressive power and unbounded suggestiveness, way of putting on idea in a charming form, humor and subtle hit and above all exalted moral tone – these beauties of Ancient Sanskrit Literature have always attracted to each and every human being who has a sense of beauty. Here we will see many aspects and features of ancient Sanskrit literature as: Irresistible charm of Sanskrit, Scientific outlook in Sanskrit, some uncritical idea in Sanskrit, Sanskrit grammar and language, some characteristic of Sanskrit poetry, continuity of the Kavya Literature, continuity of kavya style etc. This paper will be helpful and beneficial for all researchers and students.

Keyword: Treasure, elasticity, glory, irresistible charm, context, scientific, uncritical, fatalism, aphorism, characteristic, Hinayana, continuity etc

Introduction

If it was asked what is the greatest treasure which India possesses and what is her finest heritage, I would answer very unhesitatingly it is the Sanskrit language and literature and all that it contains. Its remarkable elasticity, its unusual expressive power and unbounded suggestiveness, its way of putting on idea in a charming form, its humor and subtle wit and above all, its exalted moral tone, have always appealed to every one who has a sense of beauty. The history of ancient Sanskrit literature naturally falls into two main periods: the first is the Vedic which beginning perhaps as early as 1500 BC, extended in its latest phase about 200 BC ^[1] And second is the classical literature. Classical literature is written with many literary works (religions, poems, prose and epics). After Vedic time from around 200 BC to around II AD, Sanskrit literature went through a secular phase. A major development during the secular period was the introduction of drama, with early drama set in historical epic tales.

Irresistible charm of Sanskrit

Apart from the glory of Sanskrit as a language occupying a place of honour in the languages of the world, it has irresistible to everyone. Everyone has always been thrilled by the irresistible beauty of Sanskrit language and its literature.

Two things in this context are significant. It is the nature of a spoken dialect that it undergoes constant changes. The literary form of a language, on the other hand, is by nature stationary. But changes to occur even in the literary form of a language only they are slow. The same principle applies to old Sanskrit also. The language or Rgveda, later Samhitas, Brahmanas, Upanishads and other literary works of that period did undergo changes. But about the 4th century B.C. ^[2] there appeared on the Indian horizon an intellectual giant, Panini, the greatest grammarian of all times, whose grammar was so thorough, so perfect that it exercised an overbearing authority and no change thenceforward was permitted. Sanskrit became a changeless language.

There is yet another feature of Sanskrit which differentiates it from all other classical languages.

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¹ Sanskrit, Prakrit and Apabhraṅca, Chapter-1, A History of Sanskrit Literature.

² Sanskrit, Prakrit and Apabhraṅca, Chapter-1, A History of Sanskrit Literature.

It has been used for poetic and other literary works in all the periods of Indian history, and continues to be so used even today. In the case of other classical languages like Hebrew, Greek or Latin, some ceremonial compositions might have been attempted even in later periods, but they have ceased since long to be used for new literary compositions, at least in their old forms and hence those classical languages are regarded as dead languages. But Sanskrit has been and continues to be a living classical language in the sense that it is the same Sanskrit in which Valmiki wrote more than 3000 years ago, and in which a Sanskrit scholar writes today. An unchanging and living Sanskrit has rightly been called 'Devavani' the speech of gods, who do not age, do not die and enjoy eternal youth.

Like a celestial maiden of rare beauty (apsaras), Sanskrit enjoys eternal youth, and herein lies the reason of its irresistible beauty and charm.

Scientific Outlook in Sanskrit

Besides, it is significant that the treatment of words in Sanskrit is scientific. Hindus, who invented zero, the basis of mathematical science, were pioneers science in the ancient period^[3]. We notice scientific approach in Medicine^[4], in Rhetorics, and above all in grammar of Sanskrit. Proper study of Sanskrit requires scientific bent of mind.

Some Uncritical Idea in Sanskrit

While laying so much emphasis on beauty and charm of Sanskrit language and literature, it is only proper to notice that Sanskrit literature contains some ideas which not only do not appeal to modern thinking but in some cases they are opposed and even repugnant to a critical mind. Some of those ideas are:- Fatalism, Next-worldly Conception of Morality, Exaggeration.

Panini

1. Through a complicated and elaborate system Panini evolves a process of the complete formation of each word means of suffixes, additions, changes and minor modifications^[5].
2. A large number of Panini's aphorisms deal with Vedic words with which an average student of Sanskrit is not concerned. Apart from Vedic words, there are a large number of archaic words treated in his work which are not in vogue at present, and some of which have never been used at least after the time of Bhasa and Kalidasa.
3. Moreover, during the last 200 years or so, the study of Sanskrit has made great strides. The study conducted in the present scientific age is essentially scientific. In the field of phonetics and good deal of advance has been made. Besides, we can now study Sanskrit grammar on a comparative basis, in the light of allied Indo-European languages. This new light thrown on the structure of Sanskrit by the allied language makes it clear that the etymological enervation adopted by Panini is not quite factual although it may serve a practical purpose. To take an extreme instance, according to Panini, the word changes to in comparative and superlative degrees. Obviously, this is far-fetched. There are many such instances. It may, therefore, be noted that Panini's method

does not show in view of the recent scientific progress in linguistic studies, we can hardly confine our study of Sanskrit to Panini.

It must, however be admitted that the study of Panini's work as a scientific pursuit will amply pay the labour of those who have leisure had inclination. In addition, it will also be an intellectual treatment. The only point is that Panini's work does not serve the practical purpose of learning Sanskrit within a short period. At the same time, there are some points of Sanskrit grammar where sutras of Panini are greatly helpful, and therefore they have been quoted where they are greatly helpful.

Modern Sanskrit Grammars

Now coming to Sanskrit grammars in modern languages, both European and India, we find the conditions are still worse. They give us long and frightening tables of declensions and conjugations without making any attempt to suggest devices for memorizing them. They included declensions and conjugations which have come down to us from old ages, but which have not been in use at any time. Such detailed grammars may serve as reference books, but not as textbooks.

Some efforts by scholars like Buhler, Bhandarkar and many others have been made to minimize labour required for the study of Sanskrit. They have presented Sanskrit grammar along with texts. Their efforts are admirable, but something more is required to be done in that direction.

The word samkrta means purified and well-ordered. By 150 B.C. by the joint works of the 3 grammarians, Panini, Katyayana and Patanjali, the language attained a stereotyped form which remained the same throughout the centuries, though it remained the literary language of the people. It can hardly be doubted that though Panini recognized fully the Vedic accents and forms, yet in his time it was Sanskrit and not the order Vedic languages that were spoken. Yet Sanskrit cannot be regarded as an artificial creation of the grammarians, for its development from Vedas through the Brahmanas and the Upanishads can be clearly traced. The Sanskrit language, which Panini call bhasa or speech, is closely akin to the language, which Panini calls of the Upanishads and the Brahmanas. Though this bhasa Sanskrit is not so luxurious in form as the Vedic Sanskrit, yet there is not artificial symmetry and there is a profusion of nipatas or irregular forms which makes the study of Sanskrit so bewilderingly difficult to students^[6].

Sanskrit was indeed the language not only of Kavya or literature but of all the Indian sciences, and excepting the Pali of the Hinayana Buddhists and the Prakrt of the Janis, it was the only language in which the whole of Indian expressed all her best thoughts for the last 2 or 3 thousands years, and it has united the culture of Indian and given it a synchronous form in spite of general differences of popular speech, racial and geographical economical and other differences^[7].

Some Characteristics of Sanskrit Poetry

Prof. Winternitz contended that to know to the origin of ornate poetry we must know the origin of the Alamkara literature and he seems to imply that type of literature and he seems to imply that of literature may be called ornate in which an acquaintance with the Alamkara literature or its principal may be presupposed. He held further that surely

³ Astronomy, Astrology and Mathematics, Chapter-XXVII, A History of Sanskrit Literature.

⁴ Medicine, Chapter-XXVI, A History of Sanskrit Literature.

⁵ Appendix of Technical Literature, A History of Sanskrit Literature.

Grammar, Chapter-XXI, A History of Sanskrit Literature.

⁶ Grammar, Chapter-XXI, A History of Sanskrit Literature.

⁷ Sanskrit, Prakrit and Apabhraṅga, Chapter-1, A History of Sanskrit Literature.

Valmiki did not as yet know any manual of poetics. But that is the reason for such an assurance? We know that upamas were well-known even in Vedic times and Yaska deals with upama in a fairly systematic manner, Panini also seems to be fairly acquainted with some of the fundamental types of upama. We have also reasons to believe that the alamkara type of through had its origin in the Vyakarana school. We do not also know that there were no treatises of alamkara written before Valmiki.

The comments that have been made above will show that the theory or ornate poetry (kundstidchung) is best with many difficulties. Though it is needless to trace the origin of Sanskrit kavyas to the Vedas or the Brahmins, it cannot be decided that some of the early Upanisads like the Katha, Mundaka and the Svetasvatara contain verses in the classical style. Indeed the style of the Mahabharata and the Gita may be regarded as the prolongation of the classical style which had begun already at the time of Upanisads. Among the early literature of the Kavya form that is available to us. Rhetoricians in a much later time have quoted verses from the Mahabharata to demonstrate the theory of Vyanjana and Gunibhuta-vyanjana. Though there is difference of atmosphere of Ramayana is not far removed from that of Kalidasa. As Dr. Dey has shown, we can hardly trace the origin of Sanskrit Kavyas to Prakrt sources. It has been pointed out by Dr. Dey that the theory of Renaissance of Sanskrit Kavya in the 5th or 6th century A.D., as proposed by maximally, cannot properly be supported. It is true that no extant Kavyas of any importance are available before Asvaghosa. But there are plenty of references scattered over which suggest the existence of a fairly good field of Kavya literature during the 5th to the 1st century B.C., even Panini is said to have written a work called Jambativijaya and Patanjali refers to a kavya by Vararuci ^[8].

Continuity of the Kavya Literature

Patanjali also refers to three Akhyayikas Vasavadatta, Sumnotara, and two dramas called Kamasabadha and Balibandha ^[9]. He also quotes a number of verses from which the continuity is apparent. Lalitavistara also mentions kavyakarana as a subject which was studied by Buddha ^[10]. These and various other reasons adduced in the text show fairly conclusively the existence of Kavya literature from the 2nd century B.C. to the 2nd century A.D. it has already been noticed that many of the verses of the Upanisads have been included in a classical work of kavya in later times. But most of the literature has now been lost.

Continuity of the Kavya Style

Asvaghosa's Kavya as well as Rudradamana's inscriptions shown an acquaintance with the principles of alamkara. The Prakrt inscriptions of the first two centuries of the Christian era as well as many texts of the Buddhists or the verses later found in the pali Jatakas all reveal the fact that they were written on the model of Sanskrit writings of their time. The writings of Matrçeta, Kumaraçeta, Arya-sura ^[11], so far as they have been recovered, and the verses that are found in the caraka-samhita also confirm the view that the Kavya style

was flourishing the time and this could not have been the case if there were not poetical texts at the time. There is also reason to believe that erotic, dramaturgy, the art of dancing and singing were all keeping pace with the literary development of the time.

The Sloka Form

The sloka form in which the Sanskrit Kavyas are generally written renders the whole representation into little fragmentary pictures which stand independently by themselves and this often prevent the development of a joint effect as a unitary whole. The story or the plot becomes of a secondary interest and the main attention of the reader is drawn to the poetical effusions of the writer as expressed in little pictures. It is curious to notice that excepting a few poets of the type of elements of our sentiments or of the natural objects could hardly be dealt with success. Even Kalidasa failed in his description of sublime and somber scenes. His description of the lamentation of Rati at the death of Madana in the Kumarasambhava has no tragic effect on us and it seems to be merely the amorous sentiment twisted upside down.

Concept of Drama

According to the Sanskrit rhetoricians, Kavya is divided into two classes drsya and sravya i.e. what can be seen and what can be heard. Neither the Sanskrit rhetoricians nor the poets made any essential distinction between Kavya and drama, because the object of them both is to create aesthetic representation or the art-communication. Our modern conception that drama should show the repercussion of human mind through a conflict of action and re-action in actual life cannot be applied in judging the Indian dramas.

If we take a bird's-eye view of the Sanskrit language and its literature we can say that apart from the glory of Sanskrit as a language occupying a place of honor in the language of the world, it has a charm of its own which makes direct personal appeal to everyone. As a source of spiritual delight in the form of the beauty of its literature gems, it is imperative for all intellectuals to learn Sanskrit and read its literature. This is a magnificent inheritance, and so long as this endures it will continue to inspire the lives of the people. Sanskrit language and literature has many features which differentiate it from the literatures of all other ancient classical languages. It has been used for poetic and other literary works in all the periods of Indian history, and continues to be so used even today. There is peculiar rhythm and linguistic charm in Sanskrit, which cannot be rendered in any other language.

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⁸ 1. Grammar, Chapter-XXI, A History of Sanskrit Literature.

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¹⁰ Philosophy and Religion, Chapter-XXV, A History of Sanskrit Literature.

¹¹ Asvaghosa and Early Buddhist Kavya, Chapter-III, A History of Sanskrit Literature.