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Br̥hatkathāślokaśaṅgarha: A hedonistic outlook

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Introduction

Br̥hatkathāślokaśaṅgarha is one of Sanskrit renditions of Br̥hatkathā which is a popular collection of folktales. In Br̥hatkathāślokaśaṅgarha, pleasure is treated as a supreme value and kāma as the most prominent among trivarga. In the light of this, the present paper suggests that B.K.S.S. is hedonistic in its approach and outlook towards life. According to Hedonism, *hedone* or pleasure is the ultimate standard of morality which regards pleasure as an end itself and most important intrinsic good and the proper aim of human-life. Hedonism is based on psychological assumption that man naturally seeks pleasure and avoids pain ^[1]. According to Ethical hedonism we ought to seek pleasure; it is the proper object of our desire ^[2]. It holds the idea that all people have the right to do everything in their power to achieve the greatest amount of pleasure possible to them. In B.K.S.S., attainment of pleasure is given preference over the pursuit of lofty ideals e.g. truth (satya), altruism (paropakāra), renunciation (tyāga) and austerity (tapa). But this does not support to any kind of obnoxious values harmful to the wellbeing of individual and society.

In canto 2, we find a king, who expresses his satisfaction over presence of such ministers, who are competent to handle the emergency situation and thus allowing the king to indulge into the pleasure of senses, which is considered favorable to both this world and world hereafter (this is author's exaggerated view of pleasure) ^[3]. This king organizes a drinking-party. It is notable here that consumption of wine is counted in vices of kings ^[4]. Naravāhanadatta also spends his time indulging in wine with friends and wife ^[5]. To raise the volume of merrymaking certain devices were employed, one such practice was to change pair to drink together among group of close friends with wife ^[6].

Kāma is equated with sukha (pleasure) ^[7]. Though kāma means desire and this desire entails pleasure (sukha), so we see that kāma and sukha is used interchangeably.

It is remarkable that pleasure gained by approving and charming woman is called fruit of the virtuous deeds of the past life ^[8]. At another place too, pleasure is considered as fruit of dharma ^[9].

In 7th Canto Rumaṅvāna, the Commander-in-chief of Udayana exhorts prince, Naravāhanadatta to partake in Nāgavanayātrā, a gala-event regularly celebrated in the land of Vatsa and says that his state of being deprived of pleasures pains him immensely ^[10]. Naravāhanadatta consults Hariśikha, Marubhūtika, Tapantaka and Gomukha. The first three were of the opinion that they should not participate in the procession, because leaving the city deserted runs the risk of outside attack. But Gomukha differs on this subject. He says that worry for the protection of city is uncalled for on their part and it is the time for the enjoyment of pleasures ^[11].

Gomukha further cites from dharmasāstras that one should act according to age, vocation, wealth, knowledge, birth, dress, speech and intellect. Here the opinion of Gomukha, supported by the citations from sāstras and further endorsement by Naravāhanadatta in his favour indicates that hedonistic world-view is supported by the author of text. Same Gomukha, on being asked, as what is most important among dharma, artha(wealth) and mitra(friend) answers that dharma, artha and mitra all have pleasure as their object, so pleasure is most important among these ^[12].

Essence of kāma (desire) lies in pleasure as is mentioned above, fulfillment of desire brings pleasure. Gomukha explains this relation of desire and pleasure in the light of sand-bank incident (Canto 10) where appearance of foot-print on the bank elicits desire in the mind of

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Naravāhanadatta to know about the very person who walked along the bank, after finding such person, he realizes pleasure. Pleasure as a value, as an end in-itself is vociferously advocated in the B.K.S.S. in so many ways, under many pretexts and reasons; one such reason being offered was befitting age. King Udayana wishes his son to enjoy the pleasures of life, at a time when he grew in a youth^[13].

The philosophy of pleasure which we see in B.K.S.S., finds its expression in the notion of "Nāgaraka" (beau) which appears frequently in the text. Nāgaraka is a category of person who is of refined urban taste and adept in art of love and romance. Notion of Nāgaraka is frequently mentioned in Vātsyāyana's Kāmasātra and entire chapter is devoted on this subject^[14].

In B.K.S.S., the pursuit of worldly-pleasure is held superior to the state of liberation. Pleasure that is present at hand is given importance over all those pleasures, which are to be enjoyed in far future. Contrary to established view held in tradition position, where artha and kāma are placed in the subordination to dharma, B.K.S.S. poises dharma and artha to serve the cause of kāma; pleasure or happiness which is the fulfillment of kāma is fruit of observance of dharma and artha. A person who disregards happiness, the very fruit of dharma and artha is termed sinner. To follow the path of dharma to attain pleasures in coming life-times, at the same time forsaking existent joys is not wise in the opinion of author^[15].

Pleasures elicited from Gandharvadattā's amorous moves, makes Naravāhanadatta to say that he knows worldly existence to be more beautiful than final liberation^[16]. To substantiate the idea of pleasure as prominent value, words of Bhīma (as appeared in Mahabharata) are quoted supporting the pursuit of existent pleasure^[17].

In the text, one who is given to the amorous plays and sensual-pleasures is called kāmayogin, which again appears as verbal maneuver aiming at transference of values, which can be called a kind of paradigm shift.

देवान्तभुवं ध्यान्तौ जातौ एव कामयोगिनौ।^[18]

In canto 21, we find that ascetics are shown in poor light as they were part of Gandharvadattā's svayamvara^[19].

Aspiration of householders for the heaven as well as aspiration of ascetics for mokṣa (final liberation) is termed to be ridiculous, keeping grand sensual-pleasure in the mind.

पाषण्डिनो गृहस्थांश्च मोक्षस्वर्गाभिकाङ्क्षिणः।
चिन्तितास्तान्हसामिस्म प्रत्युत्पन्नमहासुखः॥^[20]

It is a salient feature of hedonistic philosophy that it prefers pleasure or happiness, which is certain, instantaneous and present at hand rather than delayed and uncertain. Though it is believed that state of mokṣa or final liberation is the state of ultimate bliss, whereby all the suffering of worldly-existence come to an end but for many people this state remains an ideal at its best, uncertain and to be realized in distant future. Over and above, this realization demands constant spiritual practice for long time. This prospect of futuristic ultimate bliss makes it lackluster in the eyes of those, who seek pleasure in the present moment, that is why we see that ideal of mokṣa is not held high in B.K.S.S.

We see in canto 3, that in the statement of bestowal of blessings, unending pleasure and luxury are uttered, which again shows underlines the importance of pleasure^[21].

At one place in canto 21, we find that in a conversation between a mendicant and a brahmācārin, the mendicant denounces the value of asceticism and supports the pursuit of pleasures. He feels like being cheated at the hand of the doctrines of Sāṃkhya and Yoga, by forsaking the pursuit of pleasures and by following the path of liberation^[22]. Here we see that the mendicant offers reasons to prove the futility of efforts for the attainment of liberation, as well as to disprove the existence of heaven (swarga). In his opinion, if final deliverance is as easily available as straw is, so much effort is meaningless, or if it is as difficult to attain as the lotus in the sky, which is non-existent to say, then it is again futile^[23]. Mendicant also indicates towards a logical fallacy of mutual dependence in the arguments offered to prove the existence of heaven, according to which the existence of both heaven and God is proved on the base of each other's existence^[24]. Therefore, in his view, these metaphysical theories are nothing but the rag of fiction pieced together by the crook and vain braggarts. Ultimately he resolves with brahmācārin to wander freely, and to partake of the objects of senses according to their desires^[25].

Offering of the body in the love-act is equated with an act which brings puṇya^[26]. On Ṛṣadattā's leaving nun-life after getting married with Gomukha Naravāhanadatta reassures her she had attained that state which is sought after by ascetics even while leading the life of love.

सरागैव सती या त्वं वीतरागतिं गता।^[27]

He further says that she has attained the state of mokṣa, which has been told by sages as cessation of suffering, with her unbearable suffering coming to an end, she has attained that state of mokṣa.

मोक्षः कारुणिकैरुक्तःसिद्धैर्दुःखक्षयः किला
क्षीणदुःसहदुःखत्वान्मोक्षं प्राप्तासि सर्वथा॥^[28]

Here we see that author has appropriated the word 'mokṣa' in the favour of hedonism. Mokṣa is understood to be a state of final and absolute freedom from all pains and that state is attained when one goes beyond both pleasure and pain. While being in the realm of sensual pleasure one cannot claim to achieve mokṣa.

At one place the art of love and precept of mokṣa, both are poised on same pedestal saying that both are not subject to be learned by precepts rather they are subject to the practice^[29]. In canto 20, when Naravāhanadatta gets re-united with Ajinavatī after separation of four unbearable days, he equates this attainment of Ajinavatī with the attainment of fruit of austerities^[30].

Life of ascetic is shown in poor light and is seen as an aberrant from normal course of life, when Sānudāsa was under the influence of ascetic view of life, his elders including the king employ contrivances to bring him on 'right' track^[31]. Gomukha on beholding Ṛṣadattā, a Jaina-nun at that time, curses god Brahmā, who made her adopt that unfortunate conduct (of a nun) which is incompatible with her form, he has given her.

सर्वथा तं विधातारं धियत्किञ्चनकारिणम्।
येनाकारविरुद्धोऽस्यामाचारो दुर्भगः कृतः॥^[32]

Above instance again shows the value of renunciation in poor light, which goes in the favour of hedonistic worldview.

We see that author employs moral and spiritual maxims prevalent in tradition as an analogy to bring home certain point in the flow of narrative. This can be cited as an example of authorial devise to make balance between hedonistic stand, (accordingly mood and spirit of the text) and established moral values of tradition. We can pick up many examples of such type in B.K.S.S.

In canto 5, Astrologer ĀdityaŚarmā while interpreting the dream of king Udayana says, “Vanquish my lord, with (the succor of a son), the host of enemies as that of powerful passions is vanquished by efficacious meditation”.

विजयस्व महाराज पुत्रेण द्विषतां गणम्।
समाधिनेव बलिना रागादीनां बलीयसाम्॥^[33]

In canto 17, Naravāhanadatta says, “I gave up deep sleep as one, who has seen the ultimate reality, gives up illusion.”

दृष्टतत्त्व एवाविद्यां निद्रामत्यजमुत्कटात्म्।^[34]

In canto 19 Naravāhanadatta says, “as my mind was engrossed elsewhere, I did not see that unique procession, just as a saint does not see the world, though he lives in it^[35].”

Thus, in the light of B.K.S.S., we can say that popular image of Indian society that it was primarily given other-worldly cause and asceticism, gets shattered and a life-affirming, jubilant, bright, colorful, rapturous image of culture comes before us. In-fact this hedonistic picture of culture is supplementary to the picture of yoga and spirituality.

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