

VIDYAPATI: A GREAT DEVOTIONAL POET

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Abstract

Vidyapati was in the family of Maithila Brahmanas of kasyapa Gotra of Garh Bishaphi. An inscription of one of his ancestors, Karmaditya, on a temple of Haihatta Devi at Habidih, is dated in La. Sam. 213. He was a minister. His son Devaditya was a minister of peace and war and his seven sons were decorated with royal titles. Devaditya's eldest son, Vireshwara, compiled the paddhati of the most important Samskaras of the Samvedic Brahmanas of Mithila and his nephew, Ramadatta, that of the Yajurvedics. Ramadatta's father, Ganeshwara, was the Mahasamantadhipati (Lord of the feudatories). Dhireswara, great grandfather of Vidyapati, was a famous Nibandhakara. Vireshwara's son, Chandeshwar wrote his comprehensive compendium of Hindu law in seven books called Ratnakaras. The Paddhatis of Vireshwara and Ramadatta are followed in Mithila even today and the Nibandhas of Chandeshwar still form the basis of the social and religious life of Mithila. It may be noted that so many of them were members of the family of our poet. Vidyapati was the son of Ganapati Thakur and grandson of Jayadatta. He was born at Bishaphi in the second half of the fourteenth century A. D. It is not possible to suggest any exact date in the present state of our knowledge.

Index Terms- Devotional, divine, variance, chronological, authentic, equivalent.

Introduction

The date of Vidyapati is a disputed point in the annals of Mithila and all attempts to fix the date of this great poet have met with practically little or no success. The confusion, created by chronological irregularities on account of the variance of the La. Same, the Saka and the Vikrama eras, still persists and we have hardly any definite datum to start with. Since the evidences the date of Vidyapati are conflicting to assign any particular date to our poet. It was in La. Sam. 293 (-Saka 1324-1402 A. D.) that Sivasimha ascended the throne. Since Saka era is also given there and there is no difference of opinion about that era, we have taken it as authentic date and its equivalent 1402 A. D. as the starting point of Sivasimha's reign. Vidyapati was an older

contemporary of Pakshadhara Mishra who is said to have copied Vishnupurana in 1464 -65 A. D. Only few dates of the Oinwara history are recorded in the Saka era, on the evidence of which we can assign a definite period to our poet. In Saka 1324(-1402-3 A. D.) Vidyapati was alive and Sivasimha seems to have been an independent ruler. It was as an independent ruler, that Sivasimha made a grant. In Saka 1375 (-1453 A .D.), Vidyapati was alive when Narasimha was ruling. This is the first ever recorded Saka era in the epigraphy of Mithila. From two coins of Bhairavasimha (son of Narasimha) of the Oinwara dynasty we learn that he ascended the throne in Saka 1397 (-1475-76 A. D.). Since Vidyapati was alive in the reign of Bhairavasimha, we can safely say that from 1402 to 1475 A. D.,he was an active participant in the Oinwara Court. These two dates should act as lamp posts in our endeavour to fix the date of Vidyapati. In view of these facts, we can place Vidyapati somewhere between 1360 A. D. and 1480 A. D.¹

The political condition of Mithila at the time of Vidyapati was one of uncertainty. The Hindu kings were often trying to regain their independence, which was threatened by the Muslim invaders as a result of which some sort of trouble was anticipated daily. While escaping the indignity of the Muslim rulers, they stood in restless subservience with the exception of Sivasimha and Bhairavasimha and they do not appear to have regained their independence. The brahmana ministers of such kings were the rulers themselves, with few exceptions, were busy enjoying sensual pleasures. Though attached to the Oinwara Court, Vidyapati's father seems to have been a man of gentle retiring disposition, aloof from the Court intrigue and generally unconcerned either with his own career or that of his son. Though we have no recorded evidence of Vidyapati's childhood and youth, we may infer from his family background that he must have been drilled in Sanskrit. It seems that in his early life he was not able to secure the patronage of the chief of the royal family, nor were there many who would appreciate his poetry. It is why in the opening verses of Kirtilata, he deplores the dearth of good people who could reward a poet adequately. He says "In the kali age poems are composed in every house, there are their hearers in the village, critics are found in towns, but patrons are difficult to be found in the world. He must have struggled for existence in the beginning of his career.

Through his father's influence, he hovered for a time on the fringes of the court and received his first commission from Kirtisimha, who entrusted to him the task of composing Kirtilata, after the prince avenged the murder of his father. Through Kirtilata and Kirtipataka, his genius as a poet came to be recognised and after the death of kirtisimha, he came to live in the court of Devasimha. The above noted two works were written in heroic style (Virarasa) and for his purpose he adopted the Maithili-Apabhramsa. He declares his Apabhramsa as agreeable to everybody. While at the court of Devasimha, he received much favour from prince Sivasimha and his wife Lakhima. Purushapariksha was written when Devasimha was alive. Under Sivasimha,

Vidyapati's natural genius for erotic compositions found an excellent outlet. He began to compose songs in Maithili and became immortal on account of such compositions. In the court Sivasimha, he enjoyed considerable influence. After the mysterious disappearance of Sivasimha, he was left without a patron and he became devoted to the almighty with the disappearance of Sivasimha, the poet looked after Lakhima till she burnt herself with Sivasimha's effigy made of leaves. From Rajabanauli, where he was staying with Lakhima in the court of Raja Puraditya Dronwar, the poet came to live in village Padma, the capital of Padmasimha (younger brother of Sivasimha). After his death, the poet lived with his wife, Viswasadevi. He enjoyed the patronage of Narasimha and his wife, Dhiramati, and of Bhairavasimha. It was at the instance of the latter that the poet wrote Durgabhaktitarangini and after that he retired from the life of a courtier. He became immortal on account of his songs in Maithili, now commonly known as Padavali. Without having enjoyed the patronage of Sivasimha, our poet would not have been a master poet. After Sivasimha, he looked towards the almighty for help and guidance. Radha and Krishna became divine beings and the poet began to sing in their praise craving for protection. He grew serious towards the various problems of life and composed songs in honour of Vishnu, Durga, Ganga, Shiva and other Gods in a penitent mood. He continued composing devotional poetry till the end of his life. He gave up the habit of associating names of his human patrons with his own in his poems. Their concluding lines were no more meaningless expression but they now became the expression of self submission. He died on the northern bank of the Ganges and the site still stand indicated near the Vidyapatinar railway station of the north-eastern railway. His temple and tanks are still exist at Bhawanipur (Darbhanga) and Rajabanauli respectively .

The days of Vidyapati were the days of the glory of the University of Mithila, when there was a great interchange of thought between Mithila and Bengal. As a scion of the great family of distinguished scholars, Vidyapati was a renowned seer and a teacher. It is evident that he taught students as well and thereby added lustre to the already existing glorious achievements of the university of Mithila. From the colophon to a MS of the Brahmanasarvasva, we learn that this MS was dedicated to him by one of his students. It was in recognition of his scholarship that he had received the grant of village Bisphi (Darbhanga) from Sivasimha.

The ancestors of Vidyapati made notable contributions in the field of politics and culture and when our poet entered the scene, he developed intimate relation with Sivasimha and Lakhima. It is Vidyapati who has made Sivasimha immortal. The type of perfect man idealised in the Purushapariksha is represented by Sivasimha according to Vidyapati. Vidyapati says-"My poetry flows at the contemplation of feet of Lakhima Devi (the Queen)"-He was a scholar statesman, a man of action and a firm believer in truth. He was at home with the vast store of Sanskrit learning and his versatility and erudition stand exhibited by the number of works in

Sanskrit he has left behind. His wide outlook took him out of the narrow conclaves of the so called specialised nibadhakaras and scholars of his time. He was a humanist and universalist to the core and it is catholicity of interest that marks him out as one of the greatest intellectuals of his age. As a seer and true representative of his age he felt the pulse of his people and keeping in view the pressing needs of the time, he adopted and popularised his mother tongue. It was through the medium of Maithili that he communicated his message to the people at large. He was the real representative of his age.

Vaishnavism has been one of the most important cults of India and its history goes back to antiquity. The vaishnavism as a cult was in full swing in eastern India in the twelfth century A.D. when dhoyi, umapati, Govardhana, Jayadeva and many others composed many verses on Radhakrishna. Most of these poems are now collected in shridhara Dasa's saduktikaranamrita. All these poets intensified the devotional strain of a class of mystics; Mithila, though a great centre of orthodox religion and culture, was not a totally out of vaishnavite influence. The people were acquainted with the Vaishnavite thought. Jayadeva exercised a good deal of influence on the growth and development of Vaishnava thought in Mithila. The Prijataharana of Umaapati is a drama of Krishna's sport with the gopis and it was written in Maithili in the first quarter of the fourteenth century A.D. Govindadatta's Govindamanasollasa is another example of literature on Krishna legend. Umapati unleashed a force of Krishna legend to be followed by others in literature. He proved the way for the future rich traditions of Maithili love poetry. There is no doubt that Vidyapati was greatly indebted to Jayadeva and Umapati. Vacaspati Mishra, in his Tithinirnaya, starts with an invocation of the highest being while most of his works are begun with an obeisance to Hari or Krishna. Vardhamana, in his dandaviveka, has also referred to Radhakrishna. All these point to the existence of a good amount of literary output on the Krishna legend before the emergence of Vidyapati on the scene. Maithili has for centuries been celebrated for the graceful lyrics and the most famous name in the language is Vidyapati whose songs were adopted by the vaishnava reformer Chaitanya.

Vidyapati was not only aware of such a rich heritage in his own homeland but was also conversant with the different ideals, then preached. Krishna legend became the vehicle of his poetic excellence. He was well-acquainted with the Vaishnava religion. The bhuparikama and the purusahariksha amply demonstrate his inclination towards Vaishnavism. Even when he was completely free, he did not devote his energy in writing something original on Shiva or Shakti, rather he busied himself in coping the Bhagavata with great care. His only solace must have been the fact that the coping of the above M S would give him opportunity of refreshing his association with the Bhagavatalila. It will be evident from his poems also that he wrote without any dictation from his masters, he wrote songs whenever bearing on the Krishna-legend.

Conclusion

The bhakti movement of the medieval age took its inspiration from the Bhagavata-purana, and the story of the purujataharana of Umapati is also somewhat based on it. A host of reformers preached a thorough reform in the conventional form of worship because that was shaken to its foundation by the impact of Islam. The contemporary reformers influenced Vidyapati. The Puranic influence brought the Krishana-lila on the forefront and the advent of Islam acted as a catalytic agent which brought the loose elements together and gave birth to Vaishanva poetry. On the basis of the Bhagavata and the Brahmavaivarta Puranas, the conception of love was interpreted as a mode of play. It was supposed to supply the creative power, though to a rational mind it appears like an adventure into the uncharted future from the certainties of his past and present. The greatest defect was that it did not overcome the philosophy of illusion. The only difference was that old wine was now kept in a new bottle. The basis of medieval religious reform was Krishana-lila. Lila in the form of sport was first popularized by jayadeva. Through lila, Radha-Krishana legend was brought down to the level of the people. The whole theory of love came to be based upon the concept as existed between the Gopis and Krishna. Grierson is of the opinion that it dealt categorically with the relation of soul to god under the form of love which Radha bore to krishna. Here Radha represented the soul and Krishna the deity. The immortality of Radha-krishna songs is an eloquent expression of vadyapati's Bhakti. By means of lila-bhakti, our poet wishes to attain communion with Hari.

The feeling of devotion or bhaktirasa comprises the following principal sentiment : viz. shanta dasya sakhya, vastsalya, and madhura. The greatest depth of emotion is reached in the sweet sentiment. An intimate personal tie is established between Krishna and the devotee in the mental attitude. The madhaura or the sringararasa is pronounced to be the sweetest in the vaishnava faith. In this respect the vaishnava poets were indebted to Sanskrit literature. The sweet sentiment between man and woman was recognized as the dominant influence as early as the upanishadas. sringararasa. It was capable of making the universe permeated by sweetness. Vidyapati took to madhurarasa as it included all rasas. Love and sweetness were the remarkable feature of his poetry. His bhakti was based on madhrarasa. It is Radhakrishan that he diverted his attention for everything and it was his belief that people could attain their object by pinning all faith in Radhakrishna. His ultimate faith is evinced by the fact that he ,in his last days, returned to Hari for guidance, nay for deliverance. In was devoid of all rituals. His influence on later vaishnava literature would not have been so great had he been a poet of gross sensualism. In Chandidasa , the erotic passions of krishana and Radha play a very important part. As a poet of pleasure , as Rabindranath called him, Vidyapati, in his early youth, wrote entirely secular lyrics, no doubt, but his study of the puranas and other Vaishnava literature enabled him to identify

himself with the spirit of the time. As a court poet, he must have written for the pleasure of his masters, but these are also poems without bhanitas where the lila has been sung and if not all, at least these songs epitomize his Vaishnavite leanings. About 195 such poems are there (vide K. Mitra and B.B.Mazumdar, Vidyapati, nos. 467-569,719-57). Dr. Subhdra jha says “Now Radha and Krishna became divine beings; the poet began to sing in their praise ...the concluding lines became the expression of something spiritual.”²

Vidyapati believed in the unity of Godhead. He conceived of Shakti as the nourisher and sustainer of earth life. His description of the physical charms of Radha is a clear indication of the fact that he was impressed by the Shakti form of Radha. He did not distinguish between Gods. He was of the opinion that all Gods, with their different forms and shapers, were nothing but the embodiment of one Almighty, and it mattered little by which name we called them. Vidyapati, has been generally described as a Shiva by a host of Vidyapati and conservative Mithila scholars who fastidiously cling to this point. They hold the view that since his ancestors were Shiva so he should also be a Shiva. However if he were a devout Shiva, he would not have compared female breasts to Shiva in his poems. This does not sound logical.

All poems written on palm-leaves, hitherto discovered, are purely Radhakrishna songs and none of them deals with Shiva. When he wrote for spiritual satisfaction, he wrote songs on Krishna. He was a conscious poet and a finished scholar who achieved brilliant poetic feats. The sunny groves and floral meadows of the earth, in the evening rises high and overtakes his fellow poets. He occupies a unique position. Looking through the vista of centuries we see him standing in his own pure light as the guide and saviour of Vaishnava faith. He founded no sect and laid down no dogmatic creed. He inspired Chandidasa and Chaitanya and his influence has been rightly acknowledged by all. He was the first of old master singers whose short religious poems exercised such potent influence on the faiths of Eastern India. His ultimate hope lay in Krishna. Whenever he felt desperate and became morose, he put his own feelings in the mouth of Radha and painted the picture of helplessness. In such a state of mind he always remained pre-occupied with this thought and concentrated his feelings on Radhakrishna. Unless one is inspired by a particular faith one cannot show his poetic excellence. A close scrutiny will reveal to us two types of Padas in Vidyapati: Gross sensual type which he wrote for pleasing his master and highly spiritual and intellectual type which inspired the later Vaishnava poets. Charm and grace of poetry have been the basis of higher thinking of the Vaishnava philosophers. Examples of filial relationship are not lacking in Vidyapati. Vidyapati's wailing of madhaya is a sign of poet's feeling for the Radhakrishna legend. Vaishnavism was his personal acquisition through which he wished to go across the ocean of mortality. His aim was ultimate salvation while he aimed at Moksha, Chaitanya did not care for any such thing. Here lies the distinction between Vidyapati and Chaitanya. It is true that Vidyapati

found himself lost in Krishna and ultimately sought refuge in him, but with an eye on salvation. In the last stage of his life, his appeal was confined rather exclusively to a longing for salvation.

For his mental satisfaction, he composed poems on Radhakrishna whose picture is so deeply engrafted on his mind that he always liked to see Krishna palpably before him. His life-long observation of Krishna's picture failed to satisfy his longing eye, which remained wet with wistfulness. His constant faith in sin and other allied conventional philosophy is part and parcel of his Vaishnava songs; and while praying for salvation, he frankly states that throughout his life he remained preoccupied with amassing wealth by sinful means; who can relieve him of all such sinful actions. The wealth, thus amassed, was enjoyed by all, but on the day of judgment there was no other alternative but to remember his old friend Hari, who is kind and destroyer of sin. The reason why his Vaishnava songs were not popular in Mithila is to be sought in the inner conservative outlook. Their popularity would have meant the end of a class who thrived on the possession of the so called spiritual knowledge and who kept a tight hold over the credulity of the people. Checking the growth of Vaishnava faith and songs stunted the growth of Maithili literature. Vidyapati seems to have been a Vaishnava at heart, but being a believer in the unity of godhead, he wrote other things simply to maintain his position in the court and the society. As a poet of hope, he had immense faith in the potentialities of man.

References :

1. Chaudhary R.K., Mithila in the age of Vidyapati, pp 13-20
2. Jha Dr. Chandramani ; The songs of Vidyapati, pp 23-24