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THE LITERARY AND RELIGIOUS BACKGROUND OF VIDYAPATI

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Mithila is a geographical and cultural region of the Indian subcontinent, mainly located in the Indian state of Bihar. It is bounded on the north by the Himalayas and on the south west east by the Ganges, Gandka and the Gaushiki , Darbhanga, Saharsa, Purniya, North Monghyr and parts of the Teraiy region in Nepal. The Mithila Mahatmaya describes the boundary of Mithila in the following manner, "Between the Himalayas and the Ganges , intercepted by fifteen 'rivers ,like the most holy land known as Tirebhukti; beginning from the Kosi and running up to the Gandaki, its length is declared to be twenty four yojanas, that is 192 miles; beginning from the Ganges and extending up to Himalayan forests, it is sixteen yojanas wide , that is 128 miles. There is situated the city of Mithila." The name Tirbhukti, appears in the records of the Gupta period . Tirabhukti is modern Tirhut.

The antiquity of Mithila is proved beyond the shadow of doubt. The story of the Aryan Colonisation of Mithila is narrated in the shatapatha brahmana and the name Mithila or Videha is derived from Videgha Mathava. The word Mithila was derived from ;Manth; by the author of the ' Unadistura' . According to the Matsyapurana , Mithila was also the name of a sage. Maithil was one of the rulers who is said to have carred out Asvamedha yagna and thereby rendered it holy. Mithila was originally the name of the capital of the land, which was known as Videha. Mithila and Videha ultimately came to be synonymous. Mithila figures prominently in the Vadic and epic sources.

Keywords: *Devotional, Religious, Epic, Mithila, Intercepted, Synonymous.*



INTRODUCTION

Mithila is associated with the name of Janaka Videha and stands apart pre-eminently as the land given to intellectual pursuits and consequently to speculations about the spiritual well-being of man. Janaka gave impetus to philosophical discussion at his court and that the kernel round which the Indian culture had grown, developed and ultimately perfected in later years. The part of duty can be known from the usages of Mithila. A passage attributed to Yajñavalkya is later echoed by Vidyapati in his 'Purusapriksha', where he says " the people of Tirabhukti are by nature proud of their merits , it was here in Mithila that Janaka ruled , Yajñavalkya legislated and Gautama meditated. "

Mithila was also associated with the leaders of Jainism and Buddhism¹. We have no definite information about the ancient ruling dynasties after the Janaka dynasty. For some time it formed a part of the republic of Vaishali and during the Gupta period, it formed a part of the Gupta empire. It appears that it also formed a part of the empire of Harshvardhana. The period following his death is one of political confusion and the real history of Mithila, as an independent unit, begins in 1097 A. D.². when the adventurers of the south , the Karnatas, ushered in a new era of splendid glory and achievements. It was under them that Mithila once again became the centre of philosophy, law, and literature. The Karnatas were replaced by the Oinwaras In about 1325 A.D. and under that dynasty, Mithila made further progress in literature and philosophy. Vidyapati flourished under the Oinwares. The Oinwares were replaced by the Khandawalas in about 1556 A.D.³

The contribution of Mithila to the development of a synthetic Indian culture has been immense. Yajñavalkya now developed the Madhyandini branch of Yajurveda . the Yajñavalkya smriti came to be duly recognised and formed the bedrock of the Mithila school of Hindu law.⁴ The contribution of Mithila to Smriti is equally important. Mithila has produced

illustrious writers and thinkers and India is justly proud of Mithila's contribution to Nayaya. It was first systematised by Gautama and in the twelfth century A.D., Gangesha gave it a new orientation. In the realm of philosophy, specially Nyaya and Mimamsa, udyotakara, Mandana, Prabhakara, Vachaspati.. parthasarthi, udyanacharya, Murari, gangesha, pakshadhara and shamkara made their valuable contributions , while in the realm of smriti shrikara halayudha vachapati vidyapati and others are notable figures. Scholars from different parts of India used to come here for training and proficiency in Neo-Logic or Navya Mithila which greatly influenced Bengal in philosophy and poetry. The medieval period of Mithila's history has rightly been described as its golden age.

In the realm of music , Mithila made notable contribution as is evident from the Varanaratnakara of Jyotishrishwar.⁵ Since the days of Nanyadeva, Mithila has been an important centre of music. Nanyadeva is credited with having developed popular ranges and is believed to have been the inspirer of the Mithila school of music which assumed a new form after being influenced by Jayadeva. Harisimhadeva was himself a great patron of music. The Varnanaratnakara gives a detailed account of music, dance, drama, and other allied activities of the period. Books on music were written and compiled . Srihastamutavali of Shubhankara Thakur is considered to be an important contribution in this respect. Lochana's Ragataranjini mentions a number of ragas and ragini associated with the Mithila school of music.

Shiva is the most popular deity of Mithila. Vidyapati who wrote shaivasarcasuastra also composed Nacharis and Mahesavanis in honour of Shiva. The religious impact on Maithili literature is not negligible. Shiva, Shakti and Vishnu have been very popular deities and Mithila has been recognised as one of the important centers of the tantric cult. The life of the people of Mithila has been under the



wholesome influence of Tantrism and that can be gleaned even through the popular folk art, the Aripana. The first verse that is taught to a beginner is indicative of the influence of shakti and even the script, Mithilakshara,⁶ is attributed to tantric yantra. No aspect of human life is free from the deep impact of religion and it is therefore, natural that the language should have been influenced by such forces.

Mithila had a long literary tradition. Sanskrit was main vehicle of expression and the chief source of learning. Even after the Muslim conquest, when Sanskrit ceased to be a living language in a greater part of India, Mithila continued to cultivate it with all eagerness, the famous Sanskrit, now the language of a very small coterie. That is why Mathili is, to a great extent, indebted to Sanskrit even in modes, ideas, figures and themes. Sanskrit provided Maithili with a great intellectual and spiritual background. As a repository of knowledge and culture, Sanskrit reigned supreme as medium of religious and social culture. Priests, philosophers and the Nibandhakaras composed their works in the Sanskrit and they were patronized by the royalty and the aristocracy.⁷ As the Devabhasa it was held in high esteem since it was the embodiment of the Indian tradition. Writing in Sanskrit was considered to be a qualification and a sign of greatness and hence persons, even well-versed in languages, chose to write in Sanskrit. The process of writing in people's language was started by the Jainas and the Buddhists who took to Prakrit and Pali respectively. No other modern Indian language has followed the lines of Sanskrit so closely as Maithili.

Maithili literature found room to grow in the gap left by Sanskrit, after Sanskrit had become difficult for the common man. The mass pressure from below was responsible for the growth of all Provincial languages in spite of the disfavour shown by the orthodox panditas. The sources of livelihood were drying up in the orthodox fold and the caste had often to be sacrificed to economic necessity. After the

Muslim conquest, the old royalty and aristocracy, the traditional patrons of conservative faith, had either become extinct or impoverished and they were not in a position to stand in opposition to the rising Muslim power. The impact on language was inevitable as the new masters took to the recognition of the lavkikabhas had. Indigenous cults grew up and helped the growth of peoples' languages which served as the vehicles of the larger section of the populace. The basic unity of the village life was newer disturbed before the rise of the Britishers. The lower order had a natural tendency towards unity and uniformity of their communal life. Such unity arose out of racial oneness, economic interest and communal life of the village. Various popular cults had their beginning in the middle ages and these factors also helped the growth of Maithili. The village gods and goddesses like Salhesha, Bihula, etc., popular ballads like Lorika and a number of cults associated with the local deities and heroes played a role also in developing the people's language.

There has been an unbroken continuity of Maithili language and literature since its inception in the early medieval period. It is one of the oldest languages of India and its influence on the contemporary languages is immense. The regular contact between Mithila, Nepal, Assam, Bengal and Orissa in the middle ages was responsible for the propagation of this language in different parts and it was natural that there should be a mingling of thought and ideas through the medium of a common vehicle, popularly known as 'Brajabuli' in course of time. The impact of this language was so great that even a poet of the eminence of Rabindranath Tagore was attracted to compose Bhanusimha thakur's padavali in Maithili. Maithili was the main vehicle of the common culture of the whole of eastern India in these days. In spite of its affinity to sister languages of the Indo-Aryan language group, however, it stands aloof from all in following very scrupulously the complex rules regarding the honorific and non-honorific sense as well and about the use of the



appropriate personal termination indicative of the person of both the subject and the object. Many forms in other cognate languages which are otherwise obscure are easily explained when they are referred to some available forms of old and modern Maithili. Maithili seems to have emerged in the neighborhood of tenth eleventh century A .D. and has passed through successive stages of maturity.

As a poet of love, Vidyapati succeeded like a successful florist, in presenting a beautiful garland of songs, the priceless heritage of which has never been forgotten. His poems and songs were not only one of the earliest delights of Rabindranath but he even had the privilege of setting one of them to music. The poignant and deep feelings of separation are unique. Radha's love attainment at a particular moment reaches perfection to a degree unheard, throughout this love song , he was engaged in literary activity. His purely literary works are things of beauty. Of course, his compilations show the extent of his erudition but it is as that he is esteemed and has been remembered throughout centuries by the people. His influence on the poetical compositions of the neighbouring provinces is immense and immeasurable. Though Chaitanya, his songs travelled to Assam and Orisa and in Bengal they came to be written in mongrel language. The language of his songs became the vehicle of poetical expression. Vidyapati had the unique distinction of inspiring the poets of Bengal, Assam, Nepal, and Orissa. Vidyapati was a poet born on the sacred soil of Mithila, sanctified by Janaka and Yajnavalkya and was instrumental in making Maithili the vehicle of literary language throughout the whole of north-eastern India. He was the poet who made this hallowed land of Sita overflow with his rare melody and made us realize that poetry was an integral part of life and not a mere adornment of it. He laid stress on the creative and utilitarian side of learning. He made Maithili a polished language capable of expressing subtlest meanings and all shades and thoughts. He was the first great poet of the modern Indo-Aryan language and his sweet lyric had a wide

universal appeal. His tradition was carried out by Mira Bai and Suradas in the west and Chaitanya and Shankaradeva in the east. No aspect of human life escaped his notice. He is well known among his contemporaries.

His songs are brilliant poetic feats. They at once cultivate the ear, and the boldness of colours in the pictures, presented to the mind, dazzles the eyes. They present a strange combination of earthly and heavenly. As one of the earliest poets of Apabhramsa, he writes some charming mellifluous lyric and his intrinsic greatness is yet to be assessed in a proper perspective. In many ways, he is a unique poet. His lyrics have become a part of a whole people for more than five centuries now in a manner, which is unparalleled. Writing in the desila bayana' he drew forth such soul-entrancing strains from his native language that acquired for it not only an acknowledged literary status but also made it a rival to the classical language. On account of its staple being the colloquial speech, his language has a remarkable modern quality and with its sweetness, his songs never forfeit their singing quality. The rich stream of his lyrical poetry has flowed into tributaries and replenished them to such an extent that in course of time for the tributaries have become more important than the main stream.

To the Indian literature of his age, Vidyapati's songs were new. They were distinct from the formal poems and they broke with the standard poetic convention. Though writing through the medium of Maithili, he imbued Sanskrit imagery with such a tender grace as to enchant not only the learned but also the rustic villagers. Some of his images do appear to be the images of Jayadeva and other Sanskrit poets. Most of the images of Vidyapati have a freshness and individuality about them. In their profusion and boldness, his images are unique since they are drawn from the whole contemporary life, mythology, literature, business, law, court, nature etc. No image was too low or too sublime if it came pat to his purpose, while some of the images are quite fanciful.



His metaphors are guided by the conventions of Sanskrit, Chakara, bee, lotus, lion, gold, antelope, pomengrade, nectar, arrow, Rahu, moon, Khajana, lightening, trunk of a plantain, tree, sriphala, Malaya, bimba, prabala, etc and are the commonest comparisons. Instances of non-conventional similes can be seen in the song of the marriage of Vasanta, in the comparison of conjugal union to worshipping ; in comparing a woman's breast to Shiva ; in the comparison of a necklace with the currents of pralaya. Lover is compared to Rahu, elephant, lion, hunter etc. and the beloved to moon, or to the lotus leaf or to deer or to bird respectively. As a successful craftsman, he is a poet of emotion and ideas. He gives some of his most poignant and deepest feelings in simple language unadorned with any figure of speech. His gift of extraordinary sensibility and his power to express it in musical and artistic language make him supreme as a poet.

As a poet of love, Vidyapati is matchless. He had given the women her due. With a rare insight into the heart of love-lorn woman, he has explored the entire gamut of feelings that a woman has about, during and after the very act of love making. He is almost feminine while describing a woman. Radha is Vidyapati's true heroine. The softness and delicacy of female temperament stirred his deepest feelings. His lyrics are a blend of eroticism and devotion and there were reasons for their being so. Being hard out to reconcile on the one hand the demand of his patrons for the courtly and erotic poetry, and on the other hand the demand of the society for something which may save Hinduism from the onslaughts of Islam, he wrote primarily love and secular poems where the quality of ecstatic praise, of intense and personal devotion is wanting. To that extent his songs were dealing with secular love. It was in such contexts that he regarded two breasts as incarnations of Shiva. It must also be admitted that he gave his lyric a devotional character by having Radha and Krishna as the protagonists of love duels. We have a very large number of passages in the love poems of Vidyapati where

Krishna is referred to as endowed with certain divine qualities. He is called Madhava and Hari. Krishana of Vidyapati is the same person as the incarnation of Vishnu.

In the realm of poetry, Vidyapati was an original genius and as a poet of love he was unrivalled. The various titles conferred upon him show the great esteem in which he was held by all lovers of poetry and music. He himself admits that he has sung the emotions of love. At another place he says that the mirth of sexual enjoyment is the quintessence of life. About himself, he says the best among the poets is Abhinava Jayadeva and the best Sringerarasa, if accompanied with dharma, gives the greatest enjoyment to the art of poetry. He lived a full life and therefore he has idealised the dullness of life. The art of life has undoubtedly been idealized in his sweet lyrics. The supporter of 'Desilarayana' is also an exponent of the beauty of language. His language is always crystal clear. In his use of utpreksha, he is as unsurpassed as Kalidasa has been in the use of Upama. Vidyapati always prefers the concrete to the abstract. His style is picturesque and he has a wonderful capacity of easy expression. His poetic talents were almost instinctive. An instance will not be out of place here. Once Pakshadhar Misra, the renowned logician, happened to be at the house of Vidyapati. He was tired and so he slept before meal. When the food was ready, Pakshadhar was invited. When Vidyapati came to know of it, he said that the guest on account of his smallness of size could not be noticed like the Ghuna insect lying in a corner. To this pakshadhar retorted "generally the eyes of the short-sighted ones do not reach up the things that are fine."

CONCLUSION

Vidyapati is the most celebrated poet of Mithila. He was the first of the old Vaishnava master singers who spoke and wrote in Desil-Bayana (folk language), and his short hymns of prayers and praises soon became exceedingly popular. He wrote on several branches of scholarships. Prominent among them are *Keertilata* (a marvellous piece of literature



written in praise of Kirtisimha and Veerasimha of the Oinwar dynasty of Mithila); *Bhuparikrama* (geographical details of the world); *Purusapariksha* (an examination of Hindu ethical morals based on the good examples from the ancient history of India); *Keertipataka* (description of the details of the battle between Sivasimha, a worthy descendant of Keertisimha, and some Muslim rulers); *Padavali* (an account of his charming songs written in his mother tongue- desil-bayana); *Likhnavali* (written in a form of letters); *Gangavakyavali* (on religious merit of worshipping the holy Ganga); Saivasarvasvasaar (a vast treatise like an ocean on the Shaiva form of worship-can be treated as an encyclopaedia of the Shaiva cult); *Daanvakyavali* (about the importance of religious gifts for a common practioner of Hindu religion); Vibhagsasar (details of law of position of property and inheritance); *Durgabhaktitarangini* (on the form of Durga worship); *Gayapattalaka* (an excellent manual of rites to be performed on the occasion of death rites at Gaya); *Gorakshavijaya* (song-drama); *Manimanjari* (drama); *Dvaitanirnaya* (on the practices and experiments of tantra and tantra tradition of Mithila) and *Vyadi-bhakti-tarangini* (details of snake-worship in Mithila).

According to the local legend, Vidyapati was an ardent devotee of Shiva. He composed several songs in the form of Nacharis and Maheshbanis to please the Lord. Impressed with the devotion and poetic creativity of the poet, Lord Shiva came to him in a disguised form of a cowherd boy called Ugna. Ugna requested the poet that as he was an orphan boy he wanted to work in his house as his servant. With a little hesitation, the poet assigned him the job of looking after his cattle. Ugna became a very charming and affectionate servant to the poet within a very short period.

One day, Vidyapati received an invitation to participate in a royal function of the king of Mithila, Shivasimha. He took Ugna with him and they left for the king's capital. On the way the poet became very thirsty but it was a huge barren land where he saw no drops of

water. The helpless poet finally requested Ugna to bring some water. Ugna too showed his inability to bring the water and requested him to travel some more distance, but Vidyapati refused to walk further and became unconscious. He fell on the ground. Now, Ugna, who was none but Lord Shiva himself, took out a jug of water from his matted hair (jata), revived him to consciousness and gave the poet water to drink. The poet felt the taste of Ganga-water and immediately asked Ugna wherefrom he had brought it. Ugna tried to make some false story but failed to do so. He wanted to keep it a secret and that's why he avoided deliberately the poet's query, but as Ugna wanted to avoid it, the poet's curiosity increased. Finally, he appeared as Shiva, in his original form, before the poet. Vidyapati touched his feet and took the dust of Ugna's feet into his hands. Ugna now warned him not to disclose the secret before anybody including the poet's wife Sushila. Vidyapati assured Ugna to keep this secret with him.

The whole poetical sphere of the poet Vidyapati has dual current – one of worldly lust and lusture, the other of deep spiritual devotional spring. Whether he is a poet of love or spirituality, whether he is 'Bhakta' or 'Shringari', is still a disputed theme among critics. Acharya Ramchandra Shukla taunts upon them who think Vidyapati a Bhakta, firmly rejecting his spirituality, and polishing his expression of poems deeply physical burst of lust and love. Falling in such dispute is of no avail while meditating the acute appeal of the poems of Vidyapati for such worthless discussions are endless. Vidyapati is great – great in appeal, in achievement, in expression and in acceptance and that's all.

Every year a festival in his name (Vidyapati mahotsava) is celebrated for 2-3 days in the district of Darbhanga. One can easily decipher the tale of his greatness that even after 600 years of his death, he continues to live through his words. He continues to enrich the literature of Bihar and thus the literature of India.



Vidyapati is as much known for his love-lyrics as for his poetry dedicated to Shiva. His language is closest to Maithili, the language spoken around Mithila (a region in the north Bihar and region surrounding Janakpur in Nepal), closely related to the abahattha form of early Bengali.

The love songs of Vidyapati, which describe the sensuous love story of Radha and Krishna, follow a long line of Vaishnav love poetry, popular in Eastern India, and include much celebrated poetry such as Jayadeva's *Gita Govinda* of the 12th century. This tradition which uses the language of physical love to describe spiritual love, was a reflection of a key turn in Hinduism, initiated by Ramanuja in the 11th century which advocated an individual's self realization through direct love. Similar to the reformation in Christianity, this movement empowered the common man to realize God directly, without the intervention of learned priests. Part of the transformation was also a shift to local languages as opposed to the formal Sanskrit of the religious texts.

The songs he wrote as prayers to Lord Shiva are still sung in Mithila and form a rich tradition of sweet and lovely folk songs.

Vidyapati is one of the most renowned of the Vaishnava poets of Hindustan. Before him there had been the great Jayadeva, with *his Gita Govinda* made in Sanskrit; and it is to this tradition Vidyapati belongs, rather than to that of Ramananda, Kabir, and Tulasi Das, who sang of Rama and Sita. Vidyapati's fame, though he also wrote in Sanskrit, depends upon the wreath of songs (pada) in which he describes the courtship of God and the Soul, under the names of Krishna and Radha. These were written in Maithili, his mother-tongue, a dialect intermediate between Bengali and Hindi, but nearer to the former. His position as a poet and maker of language is analogous to that of Dante in Italy and Chaucer in England. He did not disdain to use the folk-speech and folk-thought for the expression of the highest matters. Just as Dante was blamed by the classical scholars of Italy, so Vidyapati was blamed by the pandits: he knew better, however, than they, and has well

earned the title of Father of Bengali Literature. Vidyapati's Vaishnava padas are at once folk and cultivated art just like the finest of the Pahari paintings, where every episode of which he sings find exquisite illustration. The poems are not, like many ballads, of unknown authorship and perhaps the work of many hands, but they are due to the folk in the sense that folk-life is glorified and popular thought is reflected. The songs as we have them are entirely the work of one supreme genius; but this genius did not stand alone, as that of modern poets must. On the contrary, its roots lay deep in the common life of fields and villages, and above all, in common faiths and superstitions. These were days when peasants yet spoke as elegantly as courtiers, and kings and cultivators shared one faith and a common view of life conditions where all things are possible to art.

It is little wonder that Vidyapati's influence on the literature of Eastern Hindustan has been profound, and that his songs became the household poetry of Bengal and Bihar.

It is quite certain that many poems of Vidyapati have an almost wholly spiritual significance. If some others seem very obviously secular, let us remember that we have no right to detach such poems from their contexts. It should not be forgotten that Vidyapati's songs, like those of all the Vaishnava poets-from Jayadeva to Rabindranath Tagore-were meant to be sung. Vidyapati belongs to the golden age of Mithila. Dr Jykanta Mishra has rightly observed that the age of Vidyapati was the same to Maithili literature as were the age of Shakespeare to English literature and the age of Aeschylus to Greek literature. The most direct and original expression of the national genius of Mithila, the lyric, found its greatest exponent of Vidyapati in this period.⁸

1. A survey of Maithili Literature, Radhakrishna Chaudhary, Santi Devi (Publisher), Patna, 1976, p.2
2. Ibid
3. Ibid



4. Ibid
 5. A survey of Maithili Literature, Radhakrishna Chaudhary, Santi Devi (Publisher), Patna, 1976, pp.3-4
 6. A survey of Maithili Literature, Radhakrishna Chaudhary, Santi Devi (Publisher), Patna, 1976, pp.4-5
 7. Ibid
 8. A History of Maithili Literature, Dr Jaykant Mishra, Tirabhukti Publication, Allahabad, 1949, page 130.
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