

BHANUBHAKT ACHARYA (1814-1868 AD)*

SOMA BANERJEE

Abstract : Bhanubhakt Acharya's uniqueness lies in the presentation of a hero more than a deity or godhead. In Bhanubhakt Acharya, the Adikavi of Nepal, we glimpse a uniquely brilliant individual, a persona who was strikingly ahead of his times, and whose ideas were iconoclastic and avant-garde. His freedom from western influence helped him not to intrude upon his style. The very flavour of his native country-Nepal is palpable in his creation. The present article deals with the sense of naivety, religious fervor and warm heartedness of the poet. Among his greatest achievements his sensitive translation of the great epic Ramayana from classical Sanskrit to work-a-day Nepalese has been viewed with importance.

Key Words : humanity, adikavi, epic, naivety, consciousness

Introduction

In today's dynamic and increasingly violent world, most people would smirk and go into denial at the mention of the adage- 'The pen is mightier than the sword'. How is it, then, that dynasties and empires come and go, power dwindles into dust, yet the poets of the country live beyond oblivion, ever green, ever passionate and independent of their contemporary malice? Be it Kalidasa or Tagore in India, Dante or Petrarch in Italy, Chaucer or Shakespeare in England, to name a few, what is that gives the poets a lease into eternity?

Life

It was with Bhanubhakt, who was born in 1814 in Tanahu, Nepal, to a Brahmin family. He was trained in the scriptures by his grandfather, and acquainted with the rites and rituals that were a daily part of the orthodox priest family. His contribution to Nepalese and world literature is significant as he translated the great epic Ramayana from chaste Sanskrit, the language of the learned into Nepali. He gave the common folk, who knew no Sanskrit, an entry into the inner terrain of a text that had always been vital to them, in religious as well as daily premises. Earlier, they were often illiterate, as the strict social order did not encourage literacy. When epics in Sanskrit were read out to them, they were dazed, as the language

was incomprehensible to them. Most poets wrote in Sanskrit, the ‘dev-bhasa’, but Bhanubhakt was unique in popularizing the Khas dialect.

The Socio-cultural backdrop

With the decline of the Khas Empire in the 15th century, the Khas language was considered low and inferior and limited to be the spoken language only. No one wrote in it. All written texts were in Sanskrit, and in Nepal its hold was very significant. Brahmins, who were at the apex of the Hindu social hierarchy, were the sole teachers and scholars in this language, and the sole exponents of all religious texts. Their family backgrounds and education were Sanskrit oriented and almost all Hindu religious texts were in Sanskrit. The children of Brahmins, as in Bhanubhakt’s case, would first study the epic Ramayana and then move on to the great Upanishads.

The Ramayana, an epic 2500 years old, a narrative variously interpreted, holds a magnetic sway over almost the entire South-Asian world.

In Java, Sumatra, Bali, Borneo and Burma the Ramayana is not just a religious text, but a cultural and social dimension of the majority of the people. The lives of the protagonists of this great epic, their joys and sorrows, moments of weakness and greatness are appropriated by the simple people half the world over, even today. They empathise fully with the human drama implicit in the epic for our own country. In evening, the villagers gather around the flickering oil-lamp in the village community space and listen with rapt attention to the expert rendition of the Ramayana, in the native dialect of the region.

Bhanubhakt as a man and a litterateur

Works of Bhanubhakt are renowned. In one, he effectively wins a pardon from the king, while he was imprisoned, by arguing very effectively. In the other, a humble but generous grass cutter wants to build a well to lessen the back-breaking work and problems of his fellow villagers. The breadth of sympathy for humanity and his dexterity over the use of the common man’s language is obvious in both the pieces.

Motiram Bhatta was the first to use the term ‘adikavi’, while writing the biography of Bhanubhakt in 1881 AD. Of course, there were many remarkable Nepalese poets before him, but he remained- ‘adi’ or primal as a seer-poet. He was very sensitive and wrote with

an understanding of the inner-essence or ‘marm’ of poetry, along with a keen consciousness of the pulse of his people. In Khas, the Ramayana became a part of the people’s lives. Long ago, in England of the middle ages, Chaucer had achieved this feat when he slowly waived away French, the courtly language, and installed the common man’s English as of national importance. The gondoliers of Venice would sing the Italian poetry of Petrarch as songs as they rowed.

In Bhanubhakt Acharya, the Adikavi of Nepal, we glimpse a uniquely brilliant individual, a persona who was strikingly ahead of his times, and whose ideas were iconoclastic and avant-garde. Among his greatest achievements is his sensitive translation of the great epic Ramayana from classical Sanskrit to work-a-day Nepalese.

Before 2nd Century BC- Oral Traditions were sung by travelling bards. Some of these are— Vyasa’s *Ramopakhyan*, Bhasa’s *Pratima Nataka*, Kalidasa’s *RaghuVamsa*, Bhavabhuti’s *Mahaviracharitam*, Muravi’s *Anargha Raghava*, Bhaja’s *Champu Ramayana*, Kamban’s Tamil *Iramavataram*, Buddha Reddy’s Telegu *Ranganath Ramayana*, Krittivasa’s Bengali *Ramayana*, Kandali’s Assamese *Ramayana*, Balaram Das’s Oriya *Dandi Ramayana*, Tulsidas’s *Avadhi Ram Charit Manas*, Eknath’s Marathi *Bhavarth Ramayana*, Tarave’s Kannada *Ramayana*, Giridhar’s Gujrati *Ramayana*, Divakara Bhatt’s Kashmiri *Ramayana* and in the 19th century Bhanubhakt’s Nepali *Ramayana*.

Most women’s Ramayanas are oral and relate directly to the women’s domestic chores and travails of their daily existence, sung in the courtyards, and during marriages. In fact, the ‘Kohbar’ where the newly weds spend their night, is decorated with the famous Madhubani paintings, with scenes from the Ramayana hinging on the wedding and romantic life of Ram and Sita in Mithila.

Sita’s abandonment by her husband and trauma, and her triumphant re-union with her mother Earth, are sung amidst tears by the rustic women each of whom weeps for her own life’s tragedies in weeping for the epic heroine.

Bhanubhakt Acharya’s uniqueness lies in the presentation of a hero more than a deity or godhead. He was vastly impressed by Ram’s heroic exploits, and his translation of the Ramayana was so exquisitely lyrical that it was more like a song than a poem. His freedom from western influence was a blessing, as it did not intrude upon his style. The very flavour

of his native country-Nepal is palpable in his creation. The content is simple, and there is a sense of naivety, a religious fervor and genuine warm heartedness in his work.

Conclusion

Bhanubhakt, the Adikavi of Nepal has been immortalized by his work, and in both demolishing the water-tight compartments of his contemporary society so that the clear, sweet stream of epic poetry could permeate every echelon of the Nepalese Society.

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Bio-Profile of the Author:

Professor, Dept. of English
Director, Centre for Latin American Studies.
Rabindrabharati University, Kolkata
E-mail : smiles@gmail.com