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The Beauty of Narration- A Brief Journey Through Sanskrit Prose Literature

Abstract

Kavyas are of two kinds, Sravya and Drisya. Of the former, some are in verse and some in prose. Works in prose – Gadyaka vyaas has been thus defined as what is bereft of verse that is prose. Of romances there are two classes, Katha and Akhyayika. Katha deals with the invented theme while the Akhyayika deals with the realities as in Harshacharita. Prose is the plain language of man that acts as a vehicle to convey the thoughts. Prose at the hands of writers like Bana and Subhandhu, reached a high standard with long compounds, double entendres and long descriptions and pleased a section of the elite of the society. Gadya was the touchstone of the real merit of a poet.

Key Words: Kavya, Gadya. Kadambari, Harshacharita, Banabhatta, Katha, Akhyayika

Kādambari is a romantic novel in Sanskrit. The Kadambari is one of the best romantic fictions of seventh century by Banabhatta. An imaginative romantic story of love, technically in the 'katha' form, the novel transcends the bounds of mortal existence and moves through three lives till the deep and passionate love finally attains its desired fulfilment. It was substantially composed by Bānabhatta in the first half of the 7th century, who did not survive to see it through completion. The novel was completed by Banabhatta's son Bhushanabhatta, according to the plan laid out by his late father. It is conventionally divided into Purvabhaga (earlier part) written by Banabhatta, and Uttarabhaga (latter part) by Bhushanabhatta.

The plot of the novel has probably been adapted from the story of King Sumanas from Gunadhya's 'Brihatkatha'. This story also appears in Somadeva's 'Kathasaritsagara'. This work can be possibly claimed to be one of the first novels in the world; making due allowance for the ambiguities of such a classification. Bana had a healthy irreverence towards many of the established orthodoxies of his time and his strength lies in his skill as a storyteller and as a creator of characters vibrant with life and individuality.

The novel has a very intricate plot. The story proceeds through several narrators in a succession of nested frames. Several characters appear in multiple births. Kadambari (the eponymous heroine of the novel) makes her appearance only past the midpoint. *Kadambari* is a lyrical prose romance that narrates the love story of Kadambari, a Gandharva princess, and Chandrapida, a prince who is eventually revealed to be the moon god. Acclaimed as a great literary work, it is replete with eloquent descriptions of palaces, forests, mountains, gardens, sunrises and sunsets and love in separation and fulfilment. Featuring an intriguing parrot-narrator, the story progresses as a delightful romantic thriller played out in the magical realms between this world and the other, in which the earthly and the divine blend in idyllic splendour.

In this marvellous texture the world of human beings, animals and birds all merge together, as do human, semi divine and divine characters; and the earth and the heavens combine in the universal bond of love that defies death and continue in the next birth, thus holding the entire creation together. It is these unique qualities of the heart and of faith that distinguishes this classic of Bana from the usual love romances in other languages and bestow on it a universality that no age can dim it.

In literary merit Kadambari is supreme. The reader loses himself in a poetic trance. The name is true to the grace, for Kadambari means also liquor. If liquor makes one forget himself, so does the Romance of Kadambari. Such is the proverbial repute. Bana's words breathe a freshness of vigour that bespeak a warm and sincere admiration of the profusion of nature which the Indian scenery offers to the poetic mind. His language is chaste yet ornate and learned yet charming and his descriptions show no end of their resources. Hence the saying – description by other poets will be what remains after Bana has tasted. His profound learning made Govardhana identify Bana as the goddess of learning.

Harshacharita - The *Harsha Charita* was the first composition of Bana and can be treated as the beginning of writing of historical poetic works in Sanskrit language.

The *Harsha Charita* ranks as the first historical biography in Sanskrit although it is written in a florid and fanciful style. Bana's detailed and vivid descriptions of rural India's natural environment as well as the extraordinary industry of the Indian people exudes the vitality of life at that time. However, since he received the patronage of the Emperor Harsha, his descriptions of his patron are not an unbiased appraisal and presents the Emperor's actions in an overly favorable light.

The Harshacharita is a monumental historical romantic fiction in 'akhyayika' form written by Banabhatta in eight chapters. The story in the Harshacharita is not a full biography but covers the reign of Harsha upto the recovery of his lost elder sister Rajyashri, and the royal and military activities over a period of some years. Though some persons, happenings, events and places described here are verified by history, it must be remembered that Bana is not writing this fictional biography as a historian but as a poet or an epic bard, decorating his tale with fancy, fantasy, the marvel of romance and adventure, and with all the literary devices of a determined poet. The Harshacharita occupies an important place in Sanskrit literature because it furnishes historical and sociological details during his time

In the first two *ucchvāsas*, Bana gives an account of his ancestry and his early life. In chapter one Bana relates the descent of his family and his own life to the end of his youth. Chapter two carries the reception of the message as well as his journey to the royal camp. Here he admires king's great mount. In Chapter three Bana speaks on a visit home, received entreaties to tell of the king and how he complied. A long description of Sthanvacvara, the capital of the race when the king sprang has been given. This leads to a eulogy of a mythical king Puspabhuti as well as an intricate explanation of his friend and associate in adventure Bhairavacharya. In the fourth chapter Prabhakaravardhana's deeds are touches upon. However, the tale deals with the queen's behaviour when her son was yet to take birth, the revelry in the kingdom when Rajya Vardhana was born, the births of Harsha and his sister Rajyasri. The wedding of Rajyasri to Maukhari Grahavarman which was an event of great political importance to the family has also been given importance.

This chapter of joyful celebration follows with a chapter of unrelieved tragedy. Rajyavardhana is bidden attack the Huns and departs with his host. He is accompanied by Harsha, however is attracted to go hunting. At that time, he is recalled as his father was down with illness. When he comes back he sees that the whole capital is filled with anxiety. Harsha's mother commits a

suicide. Then the final passing away of Harsha's father after an oration to his son has been elaborated.

He is aroused from this stance by the return of Rajya Vardhana. He is eager to throw on Harsha the duties of sovereignty and deserted himself to grief. Harsha urges him to be restraint and resolve. At this point the dread news of the killing of Grahavarman by King of Malwa is also mentioned. Rajyavardhana decides to punish the criminal. He declines help of his brother Harsha. Harsha remains gloomy. He is reported of Rajya Vardhana's success over Malwa king but murdered by a Gauda king. Harsha wanted to wage war but Skanda gupta gives wise advice. He obeys and prepares for war while omens of evil threat the fate of his enemies. In Chapter seven the movements of Indian army has been vividly described. King's ambassador from Assam has also been mentioned. The king reaches Mountains of Vindhya. In Chapter eight Nirghata, a young mountaineer has been described who helps Harsha. Rajyasri escaped from her confinement and it seems that she was wandering in that forest region. The king seeks the holy ascetic Divakaramitra whose hermitage has been portrayed brilliantly. The holy ascetic admits that he has not heard of any such princess. Then an ascetic enters with the news that a lady is about to burn herself in despair. The king rushes to find his sister there who is about to perish with her maidens. He stops her and takes her to the sage. The princess begs to be allowed to end her life. However, with wise words sage restrains her action. Harsha carries out his vow of vengeance after which both of them would adopt the red garments of the faith. The sage agrees. The party returns to the camp. Then the tale of the recovery of Rajyasri is being narrated.

Dashakumaracharita - Dandin is reputed for his elegant use of words (padalalitya) and is the precursor of the Riti School which was developed by Vamana. His most outstanding contribution to poetics is the concept of Guna. In his definition of poetry, Dandin gives more importance to the word-element. The Dashakumaracharita was considered as his second work. In the book, ten youths, led by the son of an exiled king, set out on an expedition, but are dispersed by circumstances. Wandering off in different directions - the story is spread out over a vast geographical canvas, from Kashi and Mithila in north India to Kanchi in the south - they go

through numerous hardships and tests of their strength, intelligence, and presence of mind. Later, when they are reunited, they recount their stories to each other.

The Dasakumaracharita is thus a kind of seventh-century adventure story; one conjectures that its spirit, if not its exact details, probably derives from the life experiences of Dandin, who as a youth wandered from kingdom to kingdom for twelve years after being driven into exile from his native Kanchi. What is notable is that not only do Rajavahana, the leader of the young men, and his friends get into scrapes that lead them to scheming and trickery, the impersonation of people, the assassination of enemies, and seductions and love affairs, but that all this happens without any kind of authorial censure. The Dasakumaracharita is thus considerably liberal in its approach to human conduct.

This stress on how people are, rather than how they should be, makes the Dasakumaracharita an intensely worldly book; there is nothing to which it shuts its doors. Kings, men of noble birth, sages and wise men have their say in the book, but women feature almost as prominently, and there are extended speeches by prostitutes and tricksters. Dandin's worldliness is reinforced by his attention to detail, to the shapes, colours and textures of the physical world. At one point there is a two-page, point by point description of how a woman cooks rice; at another there are details of the materials that go into a sacrificial fire: "milk, ghee, curds, sesame and white mustard seeds, animal fat, meat and blood." Such details, I imagine, are not just of literary but also of historical interest, such as the references to Chinese silk in the Mahabharata or Kalidasa's Shakuntala that tell us of the trade links between ancient India and China.

At one point in the Dasakumaracharita there is a description of two lovers who, meeting one evening in the company of friends, sit down "touching shoulder to shoulder in love's sweet way." A feature of Dandin's work is the attention he gives to the working among human beings of 'love's sweet way', which he understands as physical desire as much as tender and soulful feelings. Dandin's narration is full of rapturous descriptions of the experience of falling in love and the consummation of love, of the beauty of the human form (especially the female form; we are, after all, looking at the work of a male writer) and of the yearnings and torments of separated lovers. Even as he indulges his characters' desires, Dandin tinkers and experiments with traditional literary tropes and allusions. For instance, in one description he cleverly inverts the conventional practice of likening some aspect of a woman to something beautiful in nature: "Her

lips were not the subject of pale reflected comparison: they could not be likened to the red bimba fruit, but were that to which it is compared, the redder of the two..."One very good reason for reading works from another time and another world is that they often hold very different notions of the place of man in the universe, of human agency, of the workings of fate and chance, then modern literature does, and it is worth thinking about these ideas in relation to one's own.

Avanti Sundari Katha – Dandi describes the adventures of prince Rajavahana, mixing supernatural incidents with plausible ones. The text that is presently available is incomplete and fragmentary. The work is important from both literary and historical points of view. *Avantisundari katha* is the love story of Rajavahana and *Avantisundari*, a favourite in Sanskrit novels. It begins with twenty-six introductory stanzas followed by information about Dandin, the narrator and his family, after which the story proper commences.

The style is smooth, flowing and classical, providing the varied patterns of narration, description as well as beautiful imagery decorated with apt figures.

A characteristic feature of Dandin's method of narration is to preserve the sense of surprise and mystery by introducing startling incidents. Dandin's narration of the story is also characterized by the element of mystery. Mysterious incident is explained away by Dandin by narrating the story of *Avantisundari*, which his prose romance contains; but which is not available to us in its complete form because the incomplete text. In both the available fragments of his long prose romance *Avantisundari*, he adjusts his descriptions according to the action of his narrative and puts them where the action of the narrative is not very speedy and where the characters stop to witness or to think of an object of vital importance. In the descriptions, monotony is carefully avoided. The elaborate and ornate style used in the initial stage changes to be simpler as the narrative proceeds further.

Vasavadatta - is a Gupta period romantic *akhyayika* (tale) written in an ornate style of language that was in fashion at the height of Classical Sanskrit literature. Its author is **Subandhu**. The work's style has been described as "developed, elaborate, ornate and pedantic" and has influenced later prose writers.

Kandarpaketu, son of king Chintamani, is a handsome and charming prince. In his dreams, he once has a vision of a lovely maiden whose sheer beauty bewitches him. He resolves to set out in search of this beauty. His friend Makaranda remonstrates with him, saying that setting out into

the wilderness with no idea of one's goal is foolishness. Kandarpaketu tells him of his conviction that this girl has been his companion of many lifetimes and that they are certainly destined to be united in this lifetime and every future lifetime too. Let them set out, and fate will surely direct their steps in the right direction.

Rather than let his friend depart alone, Makaranda accompanies him in his quest, and they leave the capital in search of this unknown beauty. Soon enough, they meet with success. The two friends lie down to rest in the shade of a tree on the banks of the Narmada river. Here, the prince overhears a conversation between a pair of love-birds perched on the tree above them. The male bird is extolling the charms and virtues of Vasavadatta, daughter of king Shringarashekhara of Kusumapura. The bird reveals further that this princess had, in her dreams, had a vision of a charming prince who had smitten her heart. The princess had vividly described the young man to her companion and confidante, Tamalika, and had despaired of ever meeting with him in real life, for her destiny seemed to take her another way. The bird had overheard the description of the prince and, being a love-bird, had resolved to fly out over the country, locate the young man, and bring him to the princess.

To cut the story short, the bird leads Kandarpaketu to Tamalika and the group proceeds to Kusumapura where Tamalika arranges for Kandarpaketu to meet Vasavadatta. They meet and duly recognize each other from their respective dreams in a lyrical passage. However, Kandarpaketu learns to his horror that Vasavadatta's father, king Shringarshekhara, has arranged for her to wed Pushpaketu, son of Vijayaketu, chief of the Vidyadharas, the very next morning. Kandarpaketu and Vasavadatta flee to the Vindhya mountains forthwith, mounted upon a magic steed, leaving Makaranda behind at Kusumapura.

After reaching safety in the Vindhya mountains, the exhausted lovers fell asleep. When Kandarpaketu wakes up, he finds Vasavadatta missing. He searches for her in vain and then, mad with grief, decides to end his life. When he is on the verge of committing suicide by drowning, a voice from the sky rings out and promises him that he will be re-united with Vasavadatta. Kandarpaketu wanders for several months in the forest, distraught and lovelorn. He finally chances upon a stone image of Vasavadatta. He touches the image, and miraculously, the stone turns into a living and breathing Vasavadatta.

After regaining life, Vasavadatta narrates to Kandarpaketu the series of events that befell her after they both fell asleep in the forests of the Vindhya mountains. She awoke hungry and went

in search of wild fruits to eat. She was then caught between two groups of soldiers, each led by a chieftain who fell in love with her at first sight and wished to possess her. While they were fighting with each other, she managed to escape. During her flight through the forest, she unintentionally trespassed into the hermitage of an ascetic and disturbed his penances. Again, Vasavadatta's beauty is the culprit; her mere presence has disturbed years of penance. The hermit curses Vasavadatta that her beauty be turned to stone, and that she returns to vibrant life only upon receiving the touch of the man who is destined from previous births to be her husband; this husband of many births would control and absorb her siren-like vibes and thus allay the disasters that a loose, beautiful woman visits upon everything that she comes in contact with. By the curse of the hermit, Vasavadatta was petrified into stone.

The fact that Vasavadatta returned to life upon being touched by Kandarpaketu confirms that he has been her husband in former lifetimes and is destined to be her husband in this and future lifetimes as well. Her father, King Sringarasekhara, recognizes this and gives her hand in marriage to Kandarpaketu. The couple proceed to Kandarpaketu's paternal kingdom and live there happily ever after.

Subandhu is known for Vasavadatta. This magnum opus of Sanskrit prose literature is probably the first work in the language that has referred to Chess or similar game. He is found of playing with words particularly with double entendre. Long puns are used.

Subandhu has skillfully described the mountains, river, stream, the valour of the prince, the beauty of the heroine and the conflict of the contending armies. There is a pun in every syllable which is carried out in prose with occasional verses that is intermingled with an introduction in verse. One also finds long rolling compounds, a lulling music in the alliterations and compactness in the paronomasias. He ideally employed the Garuda style as he used enormous compounds, its love of derivation, its deliberate embellishment, its love of harsh sounds, its fondness for alliteration, its attempt to match sense closely with and cases of apparent absurdity. However, a vast variety of clever double engenders, moderation and judgement are lacking throughout in Subandhu's composition. A vast sentence rests on a single verb accompanied by a series of epithets, each composed of a long compound. Within limits puns are attractive. Sound effects at times are creative. He varied his long compounds by occasional short words in order to permit the reader to breathe. Occasionally short dialogue passages have been employed.

Conclusion

Sanskrit narratives have their origin in vedas, the oldest form being 'Samhitas' i.e., Rigveda. These narratives leave much to be imagined and interpreted by the reader as the narrative is not just symbolic but can be interpreted in many ways. The narratives have helped in the creation of collective consciousness with special individuality. There is no institutionalization and there is abundant scope for improvisation. Especially the Sanskrit narratives have elements of chain narration, cyclicalisation, elasticisation of both time & space. The prose interspersed with verses touches the inner feelings of human mind.

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