

The Impact of Sankaradeva's Dramas on the Literatures of Northern India

Dashrath Ojha

The vernacular dramas in different regions of Northern India have been examined and studied, essentially from materials available within the specific areas. After independence, a wave of comparative study swept over the country. And scholars and writers of vernacular dramas felt strong inclinations to make a study of their relative merits. Shri JC Mathur, the then Director of All India Radio, invited dramatists and critics of repute and held a seminar in New Delhi to examine different trends of dramas in various languages. During the period between independence and the seminar, prominent writers of Assam like Kaliram Medhi, Birinchi Kumar Barua, Hem Barua, professor Maheswar Neog, etc., threw a flood of light on the life and works of Sankaradeva, Madhavadeva and other dramatists of Assam. Their works opened up a new vista of comparative study of Bhāshā plays of Northern India.

I, along with Shri JC Mathur, collected and studied the original plays written in medieval times in various regions of India. After poring over these dramas, we found that Umāpati of Mithilā was the first to introduce Desi Git into Sanskrit drama, namely *Pārijāta-harana*; **but the credit of writing the entire play in a Desi Bhāshā goes to Mahāpurusa Sankaradeva of Assam**. Although prior to him, a kind of poetic play was composed and staged in Avahattha in the form of Rās, **no play in prose and poetry is to be found till we come to Sankaradeva**. Umāpati and Vidyāpati had evolved a language capable of expressing fine sentiments and ideas; but they did not care to write in prose.

Prose that may be found fit for drama is different from prose suited to story, novel and essays. The latter are meant for reading only; but drama is to be staged before an audience which comprises of different types of people. Hence, a piece of dramatic prose should be written in such a style that every section of audience may find some word and phrases of his own region. Therefore, for a dramatist, knowledge of different dialects and languages is absolutely essential. Mahāpurusa Sankaradeva had mastery over so many languages. He seems to have learnt Magadhi, Bhojpuri and Maithili, studied Sanskrit deep at the feet of his Guru, was thoroughly versed in Assamese and probably Bengali. It is possible that he picked up a little of Brajbhāshā, Western Hindi and other dialects during his sojourn in Northern India.

Having achieved mastery over a number of languages, Sankaradeva must have pondered over the problem of evolving a suitable form of prose for his dramas. He was already familiar with the beautiful songs in Maithili, which perhaps induced him to make that language the basis of the idiom he was to coin for his dramas and which came to be known as Brajabuli (known as Brajāwali-bhāsā in Assam). Dr. Sukumar Sen, making a distinction between this Brajabuli and Brajabhāsā, says: "The artificial language was given the name of Brajaboli because it reminded one of Vraja, the land sanctified by the presence of Rādhā and Krishna. The term Brajabuli, however, should not be confused with the name of Braja-bhāsā. The latter is the name of the actual spoken language, a form of Western Hindi of the district round about Mathurā." Kaliram Medhi does not agree with Dr. Sen. In his opinion, Brajabuli was not an artificial language. He says, "But the truth appears to be that Brajabuli must have been based on some spoken dialect, for no artificial language is known to have been created out of nothing".

In support of his view, he has cited the examples of the Vedic, the Gatha and the Pali languages. It is a well known fact that these languages are based on some local dialect or other. Regarding the basic dialect of Brajabuli, Medhi has come to this conclusion: “There are grounds for supporting that it is based on the old dialect of Mathurā in which Mirābāi later wrote her commentary on the Gita-Govinda, Surdas composed his Sur-Sāgar and Swami Haridās his Sādhārana Siddhānta”.

Whatever might be the reason of naming the language of the songs of the Vaisnava poets as Brajabuli, it is clear that Brajabuli differs from Bengali, Assamese and Oriya. I have already mentioned that Sankaradeva’s predecessor Umāpati, introduced Desi git for the first time in his play *Pārijāta-harana*. Let us analyse one of his gits philologically. Krishna sings the following git in the Mālava rāga:

aruna purusa disi bahali sagari nisi
gagana magana bhela candā /
muni geli kumuduni naio tohara dhani
munala mukha arabindā //

“In the east the dawn is shining and the night has passed away. The moon has set, and the chanticleer proclaims the opening day. He loudly cries, ‘O lotuses, the lilies of the night have closed their petals; wake ye up and open to the light’.

In this song some words like ‘sagari’, ‘bhela’, ‘geli’ and ‘taio’ are specially used in Magadha and Mithila. The language of Sankaradeva’s prose is different from the language of Umāpati. Sankaradeva writes in his *Kālidamana Nāt* about Krishna:

āre sabhāsada loka! Ye jagataka parama guru, parama purusa, purusottama sanātana Brahmā-
Mahesa sevita carana-pankaja Nārāyana Shri Krishna, ohi sabhāmadhye Kālidamana lilā-yātrā
koutuke karaba; tāhe sāvadhāne dekhaha-sunaha | nirantare Hari bola Hari |

In this passage, 28 out of 34 words are pure Sanskrit. Only 6 words ‘ohi’, ‘karaba’, ‘tāhe’, ‘dekhaha’, ‘sunaha’ and ‘bola’ are taken from local dialects which are easily understood by the entire people of Northern India. ‘ohi’, ‘karaha’, ‘dekhaha’, ‘sunaha’, ‘bola’, ‘tāhe’ are frequently used in the Eastern Uttar Pradesh and Bihar. ‘**Hari bola Hari**’ is a common phrase in Bengal, Assam, Magadha and Bhojapuri area.

To make the prose passages easily understandable by all, Sankaradeva devised a new technique. Since he displayed his plays before an audience which possibly comprised pilgrims from the South and the North, the Sutradhāra recited a Sanskrit sloka first to describe the incident. In this way, those Sanskrit knowing South Indians, who were unfamiliar with North Indian dialects, also could easily understand the play. Again the same ideas and incidents described are repeated through a song. Then comes a prose passage which has a beauty of its own.

Sankaradeva was really a genius. Although he describes the same incident thrice, yet every time, he does it in a slightly varying way in order to avoid monotony. Whereas an incident is beautifully described in a song, it becomes more explicit in a passage which drives the vehicle of the whole situation smoothly and speedily onwards. It can perhaps be illustrated with an example.

In the *Kāli-damana-Yātrā* when the gopas and gopikās were weeping and crying at the ferocious sight of the sylvan fire which was about to encircle them, Krishna appeared and swallowed the fire completely. Sankaradeva describes the incident in Sanskrit like this:

**tatto'ti bhitān Bhagavān gopānāsvasya satvaram /
mukhena bahimpibat mahāyogesvaro Harih // 20 //**

Sanskrit knowing pilgrims of South can easily understand it. The same incident the dramatist describes in Desi Bhāsā in this way:

**bhakataka bhiti dekhiye Shri Krishna bolala | āhe gopisaba, hāmu vidyamān thākite, kona cintā
thika? nirbhaya raha |**

In this piece of prose such Sanskrit words as 'bhakta', 'Shri-Krishna', 'gopi', 'saba', 'vidyamān', 'cintā', 'nirbhaya' give enough clue to the audience to follow the idea expressed through the Sanskrit sloka. Only verbs like 'dekhiye', 'bolala', 'thākite', 'thika' and 'raha' remain to be understood.

It is obvious that the prose passages are much more explicit than the preceding Sanskrit slokas. Naturally a question arises - why does Sankaradeva base his prose on the dialects of Eastern UP and Bihar?

It is believed that the ancestors of the Mahāpurusa migrated from Eastern Uttar Pradesh or Bihar in the 13th century AD., when some foreign invaders burnt down villages and some of the famous libraries of that area. At that time many Sanskrit scholars left their native place to settle in Assam which was beyond the reach of the invaders. These adventurous people in quest of farming land cleared the forests, prepared the ground for agricultural purposes and built houses near their agricultural fields. Thus new villages sprang up in Assam just like those which came into existence in the 19th century in Mauritius and other islands and Guyana, Kenya and other places where Biharis lived and conversed in their own mother tongue in their localities. People were surprised when Dr Ram spoke in Bhojpuri in meetings organised in his honour. It proves that Biharis have preserved their mother tongue even in foreign countries over centuries. This was the case with the Northern Indian migrants, who left their birth-places and settled in Assam.

Like Mahāpurusa Sankaradeva, at least some of his disciples also possibly belonged to migrant groups. They learnt languages like Magadhi, Bhojpuri and Maithili in their childhood, studied Sanskrit regularly from their teachers and spoke Assamese and Bengali with the inhabitants of that region. Besides these languages they learnt other dialects during their pilgrimage. In this way like Mahāpurusa Sankaradeva, they also became well-versed in many languages.

Although it is very difficult to learn so many languages, it is still more difficult to coin such novel idioms for the expression of philosophical ideas and the description of delicate situations in a drama in a way that may be understood by all. Only a creative writer like Sankaradeva and Madhavadeva could perform this in a wonderful way. As Professor Maheswar Neog has rightly said, "Sankaradeva coined the novel idiom of Brajabuli for a number of songs and dramas".

It has been already seen that almost every Sanskrit sloka is followed by a Brajabuli prose piece. To make these prose pieces comprehensible to all, Sankaradeva makes it very simple by using a large number of imperfect participles. He often uses two words: 'bole' and 'boli'; 'bole' is used when a new character appears on the stage and the Sutradhāra introduces him as saying his say. When the dialogue comes to an end, the Sutradhāra informs the audience by saying, 'Now such and such a character has ended his speech'. By following this system again and again, the sāmājika, the man in the audience, becomes familiar with these words and understands the play, even though he might belong to a different part of the country.

It was in this way that Sankaradeva's dramas become the food for all and were popular amongst all. There were no barriers of caste or creed in this. The main purpose of these dramatists was to inculcate bhakti-bhāva in the audience. Through this bhakti cult, these saint writers gave a new light to the nation which was passing through a period of conflict and political instability in the country. They declared that:

dhanya dhanya kali-kāla dhanya nara-tanu bhāla
dhanya dhanya Bhārata barise //

It was the opinion of these saints that Kali-kāla is not a despicable thing, that the human body is something admirable and that the most admirable was our country, Bhāratavarsa. To them, the country was not divided into provinces. It was one, and it was a worshipful object. Thus, in the Middle Age, they preached nationalism in a broad sense. They tried to unite the whole nation by giving a composite language, a composite culture and a common philosophy for living a happy and peaceful life. They tried to remove the despondency of the down-trodden people. Their contribution to life in India thus is unique. These dramas are not the property of only Assam, but they are a part of the common heritage of the whole of India.

After pondering over the dramatic literature in different languages produced in Northern India, one finds in all of them a peculiar similarity in their fundamental characteristics. During the period of decline of the Sanskrit drama, folk-drama and semi-literary drama came to occupy a prominent place. The various folk-forms of Rās, Yātrā, Lilā, Jhumurā, Nautanki, Bhavāi, Khyāl, Mānch, Swāng, etc fulfilled the gap created by the fast disappearing Sanskrit drama. During the Muslim rule, Sanskrit plays declined for want of patronage from the ruling class. Under such circumstances, villages and temples were the only places where play writers and playmakers could exhibit their skill. If we look at the dramatic performances of the medieval times, we find an absolute similarity everywhere. Almost every type of these plays was presented through music, dance and movements of limbs. The dances mingled with various songs enchanted the audience and kept them spell-bound for the whole nights. Many scholars believe that this kind of presentation of drama was the result of the wide influence of the Gita-Govinda tradition.

Whatever might have been the reason of this similarity, one fact is perhaps to be accepted that ***Mahāpurusa Sankaradeva influenced the dramatic activities of the North to a great extent.*** It is possible that he witnessed different types of drama during his pilgrimage and met Caitanya Mahāprabhu, Mahāprabhu Vallabhācārya and his grandson Goswāmi Viththal Nath and Narasinha Mehta and other itinerant sādhus and scholars of repute. All these were poets and directors of various types of Lilā. Naturally these Mahātmās must have exchanged their thoughts and methods of propagating the principles of bhakti-cult among the masses. The whole of the North was panting to find out ways and means to relieve themselves from despondency and melancholy. It can be easily surmised that Mahāpurusa Sankaradeva must have consulted various reformers of his age regarding this problem. It is obvious that drama, music and dance are the best media to spread any gospel of religion. According to Bhārata's Nāṭya-sāstra, the peculiarity of a Hindu drama is their general dependence on dance, song and vādyā. The ancient Indian play was produced through words, gestures, postures, costumes, songs, dances of actors and musical instruments played a prominent role during the performance.

Mahāpurusa Sankaradeva had a wonderful organising capacity. He must have called upon the reformers of his age on coming into their contact, by living with them during his pilgrimage, to spread bhakti through the medium of drama. This might be one of the reasons why the Bhakti movement spread

easily and simultaneously from Saurāshtra to Kāmarupa during the 15th and 16th centuries.

It is a well established fact that Narasinha Mehta (1500 AD) of Gujrat “associated himself with itinerant Sādhus, and was introduced by them to the mysteries of bhakti peculiar to Vrindāban. He sang and danced like a gopi”. At that time various incidents of Krishna’s life were depicted to the masses through dance and music by these Sādhus. As these Sādhus based the theme of their dramas on the **Visnu-Purāna** and the **Bhāgavata-Purāna**, they also followed that technique of drama which is mentioned in the Visnu-Purāna. In this Purāna is the phrase, *nātakam nanartuh* (Visnu-Purāna, Chapt. 93), that is, ‘a drama should be displayed through dances’.

During the medieval times, Vrindāban was the main centre of cultural activities, and Rāsalilā was considered to be the best way of culture of bhakti. The sādhus, who were experts in acting and dancing, took a prominent part in dance and drama. KM Munshi says that “Rāsalilā, in which Vallabha’s sons played the part of young Krishna, became a predominant feature of the Goswāmi’s existence. The Acharya was to be considered the centre of Rāsalilā, whose principal function was to dance the Rāsalilā”.

Though the entire plays of Rāsalilā and Rāmāsilā were composed in verse and songs, some prose dialogue is also heard at the time of presentation on the stage. Tulasi Dās, Sur Dās, Chāchā Vrindāban Dās, Bhruva Dās, Hit Haribansha and others composed entire Lilās in verse and songs, but when it was displayed, some dialogues in prose were also inserted here and there. The question is how and when these prose portions were introduced. No satisfactory answer has been found to this query so far. Some scholars feel that *Lilā players might have got the suggestions from Mahāpurusa Sankaradeva at the time of his pilgrimage to Vrindāban*. There is a custom of welcoming an honourable guest by displaying a drama in his honour. It is quite possible that at the display of Lilā plays, Sankaradeva might have, on one such occasion, suggested to the Acharyas to insert prose dialogues here and there to make it more effective and natural and since then in Rāmāsilā and Rāsalilā prose portions are introduced. But this surmise needs definite proof.

But it is beyond any doubt that Sankaradeva and Madhavadeva renovated the Gita-Govinda style of drama by incorporating variations in the plays, rhythmic body movements and the *abhinaya* technique of hand gestures and various facial expressions. Thus they added new dimensions to the Gita-Govinda style of drama. By introducing prose dialogue the playwrights created very supple and evocative scenes on the stage. They selected only those striking incidents from the lives of Rāma and Krishna which served their purpose most from the point of presentation and construction of a theme.

Another impact of the activities of Assamese dramatists is noticeable in the field of fidelity to our common mother-land. Keeping themselves aloof from the political field, they tried their best to reclaim the eastern part of the country to the rest of India, on the cultural and religious level. Through their efforts, Kāmarupa, the land of Ugratārā and Ekajatā of Buddhist origin, enchanted the masses with sweet songs of Rāma and Krishna, Sitā and Rukmini. In this way the flow of cultural and religious activities in Eastern India mingled with the main current of this great country. Therefore, the Assamese dramatists played a very important role in integrating the country by inculcating the spirit of nationalism, purity, integrity of character and devotion to the Almighty. At a critical time, when the country was passing through a great turmoil and darkness, they held a beacon light to the right path. They raised the standard of morality and removed despair and melancholy from the hearts of the common people. They were the real harbingers of peace and tranquility within India; hence, the whole country must be indebted to them.

[Dr. Dashrath Ojha, eminent writer and Indologist, formerly Professor and Head, Department of Hindi, Delhi University. The current write-up has been reproduced from Mahāpurusa Jyoti, Journal of the Srimanta Sankaradeva Sangha, Vol II, 1999]