

NATURE AS DEVOTION: EXPLORING ENVIRONMENTAL CONSCIOUSNESS IN THE SONGS OF VIDYAPATI

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Abstract

Vidyapati is a celebrated poet of Mithila. His songs are laden with a profound connection with nature, which provides a context to his poetic expressions and manifest of a backdrop imbued with essence of divinity and spirituality. This paper decodes Vidyapati's songs as attempts towards inspiring a collective ecological consciousness which find deep inculcation in his compositions. The paper also analyses the relevance of these verses as folksongs and their instrumental role in spreading awareness regarding mutual relationship shared by humans and the environment that nurtures them. His use of cycles of natures as reflecting various shades of human psyche is pertinent in acknowledging his understanding of nature. He elevates the ecological elements to the plane of divinity, fostering a deep reverence for the intrinsic values regarding nature. This paper argues that the poetic vision of Vidyapati promotes an inherent environmental ethic, wherein a reverent attitude towards natural surrounding is manifested. The paper also highlights the implications of folklore in strengthening of such attitude in a community. The ecolinguistic factor of using a language system to promote a sentiment has also been traced.

Key Words: Maithili songs, Ecolinguistics, Environment, Collective Consciousness, Folklore.

INTRODUCTION

During the 13th-14th century, the region of Mithila (present day Bihar) outshined any other centre of learning in North India in terms of its philosophical and literary advancement. From the foundation of the school of Navya-Nyāya to the brilliance of Vidyapati's verses and songs, Mithila showed quite the vitality in terms of literary production and attempts to revive the cultural heritage of Mithila as well retaining the glory of the classical language Sanskrit.

Vidyapati (1380-1460 A.D.) is a name known to all the Maithils (residents of Mithila) and his eminence as a poet, a skilled story teller, a religious expert, and a songsmith of Vaishnava songs celebrating Radha and Krishna is exclusively acknowledged. He composed works of artistic excellence in Prakrit, Apbhramsa, and Maithili. He wrote on a variety of themes, ranging from songs on love, separation, festivals, sowing and harvesting, marriage and customs (Hindu samskaras), Krishna's trifling with the gopis, and his bhakti for Shiva. Popularly revered as 'Maithil Kokil' or the cuckoo of Mithila, Vidyapati's song offerings to Lord Shiva is accepted and celebrated by all the classes of Mithila, regardless of their caste or gender. Shiva being the creator of this life, his eminence extends the spatial and temporal bounds and so is his devotion practiced by all sects of the society. Vidyapati connects the society with this particular thread of devotion which he conceived in his lyrics written for the all- transcending Shiva.

His songs, similarly, retain this attribute of timelessness and pervade all the rituals and customs of life. Manimāñjarīnātika, Bhūprakramana, Kirtilata, Purusapariksa, Goraksavijaya, Kirtipataka, Harikeli, Likhanavali, Saivasarvasara, Gangavakyavali, Vibhāgasara, Danavakyavali, and Bhuparikrama are some of his compositions. All of his compositions can be called to have traces of an enriched folk life of Mithila as well as the Hindu mythologies that were popular in the region. The songs have been ingrained in folk traditions of Mithila and are still sung as per the rituals. The profusion of ecological elements, nature and associated emotions in Maithili folk songs make the culture one of its kind where festivals like Madhushravani, Chhath, etc. celebrates the relationship shared by humans with nature. He employed the language Maithili as a medium of his popular songs and made it easy for the common people to enjoy pleasure through his poetic efforts. Ramnath Jha in Makers of Indian Literature: Vidyapati, writes

It is remarkable to note that even today, we of Mithilā are recognised as a unit of society distinct from all the rest only on account of our language and that language owes its distinctness and graceful expressiveness to the lyrical outpourings of Vidyāpati's poetic heart which had a ravishing effect on all who heard them and became at once the most popular form of literature, not only in Mithilā, but even abroad. (21)

Progressive in his views, Vidyapati also composed an array of verses where the description of the locale, the plants and animals of the surrounding find inclusion. The anthology of Vidyapati's verses and songs have been published by M. N. Dubey who has categorized his songs into six categories- Upeksha Geet (Songs of Hope), Milan-Gopan Geet (Songs of Love), Har Gouri Geet (Songs of Shiva and Gauri), Ritu Geet (Songs of Seasons), and Samanya Geet (General Song). These wide variety of songs celebrate the environment, natural abundance of Mithila and rejoices in the flora and fauna of the region which have also found insertion in philosophical, cultural as well as sociological traditions. The popularity of these songs can be assessed by their timelessness and incorporation in the everyday rituals of the population. They seemingly have eclipsed his other works and that his identity rests chiefly on these verses in the present times.

It was his artistic genius that allowed him to use the language common to the mass for producing songs and verses that retain their fame even today. Thus, he made the spoken language of his region the medium of his potential composition. The creative genius of Vidyapati can be simply assessed through his thoughtful inclusion of signifiers implying thematical importance of nature and the mutually interdependent relationship between man and the ecosystem which have been meticulously woven with the tropes of folklore in a language easily understood by the commoner. Education and awareness regarding the importance of ecological heritage is principal towards formulating a solution by establishing a sentimental relation with environment that surrounds. Vidyapati's verses which were adapted to musical tunes, developed into songs that rejoiced into the bounty of nature and rich landscapes of the Mithila region. Contemporary academician Jack Hunter in his work "Folklore, Landscapes and Ecology: Joining the Dots" stresses upon the power of storytelling in inducing a sense of accountability about the nature they thrive in. He writes:

"We may be encouraged to preserve certain sites and natural landscapes because of the stories and folk- traditions that are attached to them. A brief survey of newspaper reports from the last twenty years reveals that the power of the association between natural landscape features and folk-traditions is still very much alive. Take, for instance, the role of the elves or Huldafólk in Iceland (The Guardian 2013), or the fairies in Ireland (The Irish Times 1999), in influencing planning body decisions about roads and other construction projects. The association of certain rocks, trees or bushes with stories of the faeries, then, can lead to very real changes in behaviour. Recent moves to recognise the legal personhood of environmental features, such as rivers and mountains, in order to ensure their protection might also be understood in this context (The Guardian 2017) – a recognition that the landscape and its features are not merely resources to be plundered for human consumption, but have an intrinsic value in their own right. (221-222)

The power of art in bringing about a transformation is thereby reiterated and the presence of a similar force can be felt in the songs of Vidyapati who resurrects folklore to the aid of humanity. He adapts the local language to amplify a sense of reverence for nature, thereby also fostering a sense of ecological responsibility amidst the people. Language and its skilful ornamentation through folklore proves instrumental in building up of a consciousness that induces environmental awareness as well as emphasizes upon the need to sustain ecological values across generations.

Language, culture, and human behaviour share close affinity and hold potential to impact humanistic approach regarding life and surrounding. Any culture cannot be analysed in isolation without referring to the latter two

factors. It must be studied as a part of the larger system of language and the conclusive change observed in human attitude. Edward Sapir in “Language, Race and Culture” states that,

Language has a setting. The people that speak it belong to a race (or a number of races), that is, to a group which is set off by physical characteristics from other groups. Again, language does not exist apart from culture, that is, from the socially inherited assemblage of practices and beliefs that determines the texture of our lives. (100)

Generation of folk songs in the language Maithili, therefore, had an imperative role in shaping the consciousness of the speakers and in stimulating environmental cognition. The incorporation of such ecological elements into everyday rituals through folklore that Vidyapati promoted in his songs have helped in strengthening human ecology relationship. The poet has integrated the metaphors of nature in Maithili folksongs and has resorted to the language to confer an environment friendly perception amidst the speakers.

The genealogy of folksongs is particularly in the collective memory of a culture and it is ingrained with textures of emotions, experiences and foresights that requires to be transcended further and preserved. The lores are laden with laconic expressions of experiences that the group share and are passed on orally to further generations within a community. The songs are generally adapted by the people of the community to be sung during any celebration or occasions reeking of the essential fervour of their cultural roots. They hold the potential to convey what people might not be able to express in their day-to-day conversations. Alan Dundes in his analysis of folklores argues that in folklore “one finds a people’s own unselfconscious picture of themselves” (xi). He establishes folklore as an active process rather than a historic artifice and asserts it to be a reflection of a pattern of practice that the group showcase.

Instead of “meaningless survivals”, Dundes stresses upon folklore as “a rich and meaningful source for the study of cognition and values” (xi-xii). Vidyapati’s songs are one such prototypes of folkloristic tradition that has been a witness of the traditional turns- social and cultural, that the community of the region has undergone. The study of such songs that are circumscribed around the theme of nature and its direct association with human life provide a testament to the notion that folklores not just allow a community to stand out but they also critically accentuate the issues pertinent to the contemporary time.

These songs have mostly been regarded as pursuits of leisure and their significance beyond recreational bounds has hardly been assessed. Their potential to contribute towards shaping the societies and their respective ideological inclinations as well as the condition of environments in which they sustain have proved them to be markers of cultural and ecological identities. They are laden with cultural implications governed by the ecological, geographical and socio-economical conditioning of the people of the region. The songs of Vidyapati borrow exceptionally from natural heritage of Mithila. Deben Bhattacharya, in the “Translator’s Notes” of Love Songs of Vidyapati, deliberates about the essence in Vidyapati’s lyrics/poems. He writes,

The greatness of Vidyapati’s songs depends on the fusion of natural phenomena such as lightning and clouds, the moon and the night lily, the lotus and the bee with the greatest of lovers, Radha and Krishna and their emotional reactions to love, anguish, passion, jealousy, joy and sorrow. (7)

The true essence of Vidyapati’s poetic endeavours can be, therefore, said to lie in the surrounding in which he infuses the spirit of Mithila’s culture along with the extraordinary fleets of imagination. By bringing in repetitively the elements that appeal to the ground level listener of the songs and verses, be it the inculcation of weather patterns particular to the region or the usage of refrained images and metaphors of lotus or moon, Vidyapati reflects upon the collective encounters and familiar perceptions of the speakers of Maithili.

Blue lotuses
Flower everywhere
And Black kokilas sing...
King of the seasons,
Spring has come
And wild with longing
The bee goes to his love. (89, Love Songs of Vidyapati)

He can be observed engaging in the sentimental values of significance, associating the latter with nature and introduces them in his songs for the commoners to find a relation with the lyrics. Hence, the role of ecolinguistics in developing such a consciousness towards natural surrounding can also be emphasized.

In “Ecological Thinking, Consciousness, Responsibility”, V. Panov defines ecological consciousness as “a reflection of the psyche of a variety of man's relationship with nature, which mediate its behaviour in the “natural world”, and express axiological position of the subject of consciousness in relation to the natural world” (380). Certainly, Vidyapati's songs are imbued with natural elements that metaphorically represent and reflect human state of mind and establishes the very fact that the two components are mutually dependent on each other for their sustenance. Panov further asserts that both anthropocentric as well as eco-centric elements are critical for developing an understanding of ecological consciousness in a community which are indirectly embedded in the folksongs.

A similar study in ecolinguistics by Arran Stibbe states that “Ecolinguistics, then, is about critiquing forms of language that contribute to ecological destruction, and aiding in the search for new forms of language that inspire people to protect the natural world” (1, Ecolinguistics: Language, Ecology and the Stories We Live By). The Maithili compositions of Vidyapati can be decoded as aiding in this venture of ecolinguistics that has persuaded the followers to conserve the natural environment. It had emerged out to be curating a system that intermixes folklore with linguistic patterns easily understood by the mass and attempts to induce a behavioural pattern that treats the natural world right.

The paper explores how Vidyapati's poems adapted into Maithil folksongs serve as a way to preserve not just the natural heritage but also in encouraging a propagation of a sensibility with the interest of community at heart. It interrogates how the poet used the spoken language of the to compose songs in accordance with cultural status of the audience so that it reaches the men and women of his period. Ramnath Jha justifying the title given to Vidyapati- ‘Abhinav Jaydev’, writes

In Vidyāpati's compositions, both the sound and sense appealed to the common men and women and not the sound only. It was in this sense that Vidyāpati was an Abhinava Jayadeva because Jayadeva's innovation popularised only the sound element but Vidyāpati really modernised it by popularising both the sound and sense. (43)

Nature, in the hands of Vidyapati, has undergone a sensuous treatment, especially in the love songs, for the poet the power of nature to evoke similar emotions in humans has been promoted in his Padavali.

नव वृंदावन नव नव तरुगन, नव नव बिकसित फूल।
नव बसंत नवल मलयानिल, मातल नव अलि कूल ॥2॥
बिहरए नवलकिशोर ।

कालिंदि-पुलिन कुंज वन सोभन, नव-नव प्रेम-विभोर ॥4॥ (Vidyapati Padavali, 175).

Vidyapati perceives beauty in every element of the environment and with equal reverence he portrays them under the tint of sensitive imagination. The happiness of Krishna at the onset of spring has been described by him in his verses. The close affinity of season and emotions has been a chief subject in his songs.

चलु देखउ जाऊ रितु बसंत। जहाँ कुंद-कुसुम केतिक हसंत ॥ 2 ॥

जहाँ चंदा निरमल भरकरा। जहाँ रयनि उजागर दिन अँधार ॥4॥

जहाँ मुगुधलि मानिनि करए माना। परिपंथिहि पेखए पँचबान ॥6॥

परिठबड़ सरस कवि-कंठहारा। मधुसूदन राधा बन बिहार ॥8॥ (Vidyapati Padavali, 180).

Seasonal changes of nature has been a recurring theme in his songs. With a wide array of symbolism, metaphors and personifications, we witness the seasons reflecting human psyche. This in turn can be decoded as a subtle attempt to unite the lives in the ecosystem as one collective whole.

मघ मास सिरिपंचमि गँजाइलि, नवम मास पंचम हरुआई हे।

अति घन पीड़ा दुख बड़ पाओल, बनसपती भेलि धाई हे॥2॥

सुभ खन बेरा सुकुल पक्ख हे, दिनकर उदित समाई हे।

सोरह सम्पुन बतिस लखने सह, जनम लेल ऋतुराई हे॥4॥

नाचए जुबतिजना हरखित मन, जनमल बाल मधाई हे।

मधुर महारस मंगल गाबए, मानिनि मान उड़ाई हे॥6॥

बह मलयानिल ओत उचित हे, नव घन भउ उजिआरा।

माधवि फूल भेल गजमुकुता तुल, तें देल बंदनवारा ॥४॥ (Vidyapati Padavali, 174).

The poet has expressed the effects of changing seasons on the hearts, minds and desires of the inhabitants. Like change in the hues of environment, human aspirations and yearnings also undergo alterations. Such an understanding of human psychology and its reflection in the ecology that inhabits them can be deciphered as poet's way of asserting the very fact that variation in man's approach towards nature can result in transformation of ecological conditions.

Several elements of environment, thereby, find infusion in the Maithili folksongs of Vidyapati. The acknowledgement of such a folk culture that inspires to conserve the ecosystem definitely holds the potential to lead us towards a better future with respect to the health of the environment. Vidyapati's folk heritage's reassertion as a force attempting to construe folksongs as influential in building up of a collective ecological consciousness, unravels not just the latent capacity of songs to persuade but also the potential of folklores and related cultural practices in conserving the biodiversity and promote an environment friendly attitude in society.

The songs prove out to be an excellent judge of human psyche, the desires they harbour and also demonstrates the close affiliation it shares with nature. The paper studies the songs and verses of Vidyapati as providing avenues of understanding human emotions. It also corroborates the very notion of the songs as instilling a



collective consciousness amidst the people through their adaptation into folksongs that also has been a significant part of the culture of Mithila.

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