

Karnata Dynasty's Contribution to Maithili Culture and Literature

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Abstract:

Mithila, comprising the northern regions of Bihar and bordering regions of Nepal, is a land of several dynasties whose contributions have strongly influenced the course of events of her history. The Karnatas, the rulers of medieval Mithila, also contributed a lot in different walks of Mithila. Maithili, an Indo-Aryan language, is largely spoken in the Mithila region of Bihar and the south-eastern Terai region of Nepal. My paper attempts to explore the contributions made by the dynasty to the culture and literature of Mithila. The paper finds the growth of language during the rule of the Karnata dynasty.

Keywords: Harisinhadeva, Maithili culture and literature, Nanyadeva, the Karnata dynasty, etc.

Introduction:

It was in the year 1097 AD, a landmark in the history of Mithila, that Nanyadeva founded the Karnata dynasty. The foundation of this dynasty established a new epoch in the history of Bihar in general and Mithila in particular. This was the first historic dynasty, after the fall of Videhas of Mithila, that ruled independently for almost two hundred years.

The origin of the Karnatas has yet to be discovered. However, some *Pala* inscriptions suggest that the Karnatas originally belonged to the South (Majumdar 110-113). In the Mithila tradition, Nanyadeva, like his counterpart in Bengal, is called as *Karnatakulbhusana* and *Karnataksatriya*. Verse iv of the *Madhainagar* grant and the *Naihati* grant of Ballasena (Thomas 159) also acknowledge the Senas as the *Karnataksatriya*. On the basis of the above-mentioned grants, it can safely be assumed that some Karnata officials acquired political power and established an independent kingdom.

Statement of the Problem;

Barring a few scanty studies, no comprehensive study so far has been done to analyse the Karnatas' contribution to Maithili literature and culture. Hence, my study presents a comprehensive picture of Maithili literature and culture under the Karnata dynasty.

Objective of the Study;

The general objective of the paper is to explore the Karnata dynasty's contribution to Maithili literature and culture.

Review of Literature:

There exists a number of related works regarding the rise and fall of the Karnata dynasty in Mithila. However, I have chosen only a few works on the Karnatas.

Nilkantha Shastri finds the emergence of the Karnatas in the Pala inscriptions as fictitious. He further negates any inference of any Karnata element in the Pala population in Bengal or Magadha. However, the frequent mention of the Karnatas in those inscriptions is a clear indication of them being employed by the Palas as important officials. It also indicates that the Karnata officials exploited the weak position of the supreme authority.

Sandhyakara Nandi is of the view that “Varendra was successfully guarded against the Karnatas (Nandi 24). While Acha, a feudatory of Vikramaditya VI, carried arms into Bengal, the Palas had to face two rising Karnata chiefs, viz., Vijayasena in Bengal and Nanyadeva in Mithila (Fleet 1). However, Mithila, under the Pala territory, seems to have been invaded by the Vangas and Vangalas groups of Southerners under the Cholas and Ramapala might have taken the help of the Cholas to restrict their common enemy, the Karnatas (Nandi 24).

Jayaswal opined that the Karnatas were the remnants of the Chola army or, more likely, a remnant of the Karnata allies of Karna who overrun Mithila between 1040 and 1060 AD. However, we should keep the fact in mind that Karna’s overrunning of Mithila took place almost forty years before the accession of Nanyadeva (Chaudhary 130).

R. D. Banerji also finds the Karnatas as the remnants of the Chola army (Banerji 99). However, the views expressed by Banerji and Jayaswal seem to be improbable as a number of scholars have not found anything which can show that the Karnatas formed part of the Chola army (Paul 475-76).

Methodology

A descriptive as well as an analytical approach was adopted for the preparation of the paper. For that, a quantitative content analysis was employed to find out the recent research works’ trends, trace the innovative contributions to Maithili literature, and establish a base for future research. A quantitative content analysis aids in summarising several research articles and presenting a strong and justifiable generalisation in the research field (Ozcinar 2009, 559-580). The study was based on research papers from different database websites using keywords such as ‘Harisinhadeva, Maithili culture and literature, Nanyadeva, The Karnata dynasty,’ etc.

The Karnatas’ Contribution to Culture and Literature:

There is a permanent imprint of the Karnata dynasty on Maithili culture and literature. The Karnata rulers laboured industriously and inexhaustibly to raise the cultural and moral standards of the Maithili people. They encouraged the construction of various temples and the digging of wells and ponds in several parts of the land. Educational institutions and organisations received ‘state grants’ (Chaudhary 125). Maithili people’s life and condition under the Karnatas can best be understood by a critical and analytical study of the *Varnaratnakara* by Jyotirishwara Thakur.

Nyaya (Logic) and *Purvamimansa* (Epistemology) subjects were developed against the continuation and defence of the orthodox Brahmanical culture in Mithila. Students and scholars across India flocked to Mithila to study these two subjects. A large number of Buddhist scholars got shelter in Mithila about the time of the Muslim invasion and conquest of Bihar. As Mithila was comparatively free from any foreign invasion, it protected a large number of scholars from adjoining countries and devoted much of its time to the pursuit of knowledge.

Chandeswara Thakura's family kept the banner of *Smriti* studies high. Some scholars such as Sridatta, Harinatha, Indupati and his pupils, Laksmipati and others, contributed a lot to develop this branch of literature. With his *Supadma* and its complement, Padmanabhadatta started an important branch of a school of Grammar. Jyotirishwara compiled *Varnaratnakara*, the earliest extant work in Mithila, and Sridharadasa compiled his famous work known as *Saduktikarnamrta*. Bhanudatta Mishra wrote some.

A book on *Tantra* named *Kalikastotra* was also compiled during the Karnatas. Some can also find the comments of Ratneswara in the book titled *Saraswatikanthavarna*. Scholars also copied the manuscripts of the *Bhagwata* and the *Vishnupurana*. Sanskrit literature found its full play during this period. Owing to the danger of the Muslim invasion, the Maithili people started studying the *Smritis* with renewed vigour. It was this critical stage that led the Brahmanas to essay and re-enforce the tottering edifice. They took these *Smritis* to preserve the individuality of the Hindu society (Banerji-Sastri 62-79).

Navya-Nyaya, an amalgam of *Nyaya* (Logic) and *Vaisesika* (the knowledge of substance), became prominent in Mithila during the Karnata dynasty. These systems have a common idea of the origin of the world from the atom. These systems were closely connected to each other (Chaudhary 123). They did not accept the existence of God. Their theology, first developed in Udayanacharya's *Kusumanjali*, regarded God as a special soul. In the course of time, Bengal turned out to be the seat of *Navya* learning, and Dr. D. C. Sen rightly finds Mithila to be the root of Bengali's civilisation. To some scholars, Mithila was also the seat of *Vedanta*, *Nyaya*, *Mimamsa* and *Sankhya* systems. According to O'malley, 'the history of Mithila centres around...the court engrossed in luxurious enjoyment of literature and learning' (O'malley 194). Mithila, during the Muslim invasion of Bengal and after the decline of Nalanda and Vikramasila universities, became a flourishing centre of learning. Not only this, the Mithila school of thought, enjoying the generous and active patronage of the ruling family, also contributed to the development of Sanskrit studies mainly in the fields of *Smriti*, *Nibhandas* (Essays) and Philosophy in India. The intellectual activity of Karnata's Mithila encouraged the revival of Sanskritic studies in Bengal. During this period, Mithila has an important bearing on an adequate understanding of Bengali life and culture.

As far as art and architecture are concerned, we can find only a few broken and scattered pieces of stone images, door frames and buildings. We need more scientific exploration and excavation. Whatever signs of art one can find in Mithila may simply be assigned to the Karnatas. They maintained the black stone traditions of the Palas and the Senas. These rulers directly influenced the Mithila art. The black stone tradition can best be found in some places such as Anchratharhi, Bheet-Bhagwanpur, Bahera, Bairajgarh, etc, in the Mithila region. The signs of buildings and different images found in these places are the finest examples of the art and sculptor of the Karnatas. These images are a vividly iconoclastic representation of religious themes endowed with worldly consciousness. We can find their counterpart in literature,

especially in Vidyapati's poetry. During this period, the Mithila people continually cultivated 'Fine art' with full vigour. Door-frames found at Bahera, Kandaha, and Belwa are some of the finest examples of art under the Karnatas. Temples found at these places also had a special sign of Mithila architecture. Hence, Spooner rightly called it the 'Tirhut types of temples'(121-134).

Sangeetaratnakara of Sarangadhara clearly suggests that Nanyadeva, the founder of the Karnata dynasty in Mithila, was himself a master of singing and a popular writer of music. He himself described his commentary on *Natyasastra* as a *Granthamaharnava*, an epithet found in the Andhratharhi inscription of Sridhardasa. Nanyadeva was chiefly indebted to Kasyapa, Matanga and Abhinavagupta. Nanyadeva had added much new material in his treatment of *Jatis* and *Ragas*. To suit high and low characters, it is only Nanyadeva, after Bharata, who is considered to have given perfect details and examples in different Prakrit tongues. The development of the popular *Ragas* in Mithila is credited to him. *Nardiya*, the traditional music of Mithila, influenced the Assamese and Nepalese music. Vidyapati's *Purushpariksha* finds Harisimhaddeva, too, as a great lover of music. Umapati's use of Maithili lyrical songs in his drama, *Parijataharana*, is suggestive of Mithila being the seat of lyrical poetry. Jyotiriswara, in his *Varnaratnakara*, also refers to the existence of a poetic ballad, popularly known as *Lorika*, which is still equally popular in Mithila. It was only the Karnatas who first gave Maithili, after the classical language, the dignity of the literary vehicle in the whole of eastern India (Chatterji 69). The Karnatas also influenced Nepal. The institution of the Deccan Brahmanas can best understand the Karnatas' connection to Nepal as the priest-in-charge of Pashupatinath temple.

Conclusion:

This brief study shows that Mithila, under the Karnata dynasty, experienced a period of relative peace that helped writers, poets and artists to receive royal patronage. The emergence of new literature and folk songs during the period helped the Maithili language to grow greatly. It was during this very period that Jyotiriswara Thakur composed his unique book, *Varnaratnakara*, the earliest prose specimen not only in Maithili but also in all modern Aryan languages of India.

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