Buddhacarita of Asvaghosa: A Critical Study

ABSTRACT

Asvaghosa’s Buddhacarita is the life history of Gautama Buddha. The work has made a great influence on literature, poetics, culture and history of Indian society with its poetic beauty and literary merit. A detailed study of Buddhacarita shows that the poet was a knowledgeable man and he was accurate in his knowledge. In Buddhacarita, the life and the acts of the Buddha from his birth to his demise is recorded. His works are reflection of the Indian society of that period. The thesis discusses carefully different sides of Buddhacarita in six chapters dealing with general introduction, delineation of love and nature, meters and alamkaras, socio-political condition and lastly major findings and conclusions. Under these chapters a critical and thoughtful study has been presented as far as possible. The present paper is an attempt to highlight the aforesaid chapters of the proposed research work entitled with “Buddhacarita of Asvaghosa: A critical study” and thus find out the major outcomes.

The Buddhacarita has two parts and each part is divided into 14 cantos. In the first part, the life of Buddha since his enlightenment is dealt with and the part two is devoted to the description of his return to Kapilavastu. Unfortunately out of a total
of 28 cantos, the Sanskrit text of this invaluable work comprises 17 cantos only. E.H. Johnston has composed the remaining cantos from English translations of Buddhacarita based on Chinese and Tibetan sources. Almost all the cantos of Buddhacarita are full of natural descriptions. In this connection the researcher has carefully studied the works of the other epic writers and some research works and has employed some personal opinion to critically delineate the love and natural beauty. To focus on the socio-political condition as reflected in Buddhacarita, information about the history of social, religious and political traditions have been traced from Vedic to Kautilya and then to Asvaghosa’s times and their relevancy in recent times have also been represented. There is also a critical appreciation of the poem where Asvaghosa’s success as an epic poet, his style etc. have been discussed elaborately.

The traditions embodied in the Chinese and Tibetan sources agree in asserting the Asvaghosa was contemporary of king Kaniska (1st cent. AD). Studies suggest that he was the son of Suvarnaksi and a dweller of Saketa (Ayodhya). The literary style of Asvaghosa proves that he lived several centuries before Kalidasa. We may cite some similarities between the works of Kalidasa and Asvaghosa in support of that. Besides these there are so many references from which it may be said that Kalidasa who flourished probably in the 5th century A.D., was influenced by Asvaghosa. It is generally supposed in the Chinese, Tibetan and other traditions that
Asvaghosa was a Brahmin by birth and a Saiva by faith. Later on after converted into Buddhism he tried to establish a faith with the noble and peaceful ‘Laws of Buddha’ and this difficult task was done by him with his writings. As he was a Brahmin by birth, he had an intimate knowledge of the Vedas, Brahmanical tenants, Hindu scriptures, Epics etc.

Asvaghosa tries to rejoice the heart of the reader with a colourful and meaningful ornate poetry. For that the poet has introduced many beautiful scenes of love and nature, a large number of legendary figures and many mythological stories. The poet has inserted some colourful night scenes and some battle scenes also so that the readers never get annoyed of reading the poem. But his real motive was to propagate the teachings of Lord Buddha in a concise form.

Asvaghosa has depicted Santarasa as the main sentiment in the Buddhacarita. He wrote his Buddhacarita in order to establish the superiority of Lord Buddha and preached the doctrines of Buddhism. But if we examine carefully then we will see that Asvaghosa has also depicted the sentiment Srngara as the subordinate sentiment. We also find some references made by the poet where his apathy regarding the worldly passion has revealed. He also cited some examples of passions which are harmful to human beings. But Asvaghosa is always more of a poet than a monk at least in the Buddhacarita and so that he fulfils these
requirements as presentation of love scenes is one of the indispensable elements of an ornate court poem.

Asvaghosa has given beautiful descriptions of flora and fauna in the Buddhacarita. He has mentioned forests, the hilly tracks and lofty mountains which were largely covered with thick forests and cities were also green belts. The poet has mentioned numerous trees, some forest trees etc. In these descriptions we can make an idea of the poet’s knowledge for botany. We have got mention of the mountains like Himalaya, Kailasa, Vindhya etc., and the description of some rivers, all these geographical descriptions are found in the Buddhacarita. Traditional seasons such as Vasanta, Varsha and Sarat has mentioned along with their characteristics in this epic.

We come across various classifications of Kavya in Sanskrit poetics. The term Kavya means literature as a form of art. Kavya is composed by ‘Kavi’s, so the word Kavya in its widest sense connotes all that is the work of a poet. In that sense Kavya or poetry is the subject of classical Sanskrit literature and it not only means ‘metrical compositions’ but signifies any literary peace which is highly sentimental. The science of poetics is known as ‘Alamkara-sastra’ in Sanskrit which shows the importance laid by the rhetoricians on the ‘Alamkaras’ or figures of speech. We shall content ourselves by citing only those which contain the most representative ‘Alamkaras’ and the most beautiful or meaningful
from the point of view of assessing the greatness of the poem and the author. A verse (padya) is a short piece of composition regulated by harmonious arrangement of syllables adapted to please the ear and reach the heart of the reader or hearer. The form of harmonious succession of syllables is called metre (chanda). The metres employed by Asvaghosa are very numerous. In this thesis we have taken up some Alamkaras and Metres as an example to show and illustrate Asvaghosa’s proficiency in this sphere.

The Buddhacarita provides us sufficient socio-political information in respect of the times of Asvaghosa. To focus on the socio-political condition as reflected in Buddhacarita, information about the history of social, religious and political traditions have been traced from Vedic to Kautilya and then to Asvaghosa’s times and their relevancy in recent times have also been represented.

The Buddhacarita provides us sufficient socio-political information in respect of the times of Asvaghosa. At that time the society was obviously traditional and consisted of four casts – Brahmans, Ksatriyas, Vaisyas and Sudras. From Buddhacarita, the different activities and the status of different classes of people has not come to our notice. The rules of polity for the Kings are repeatedly mentioned mostly in similes. He uses the term Rajasastra for the science of politics, while Niti at Buddhacarita means the principles of worldly conduct. The King Suddhodana administered his kingdom according to the traditional law. Ministers
played a very significant role in the administration of the kingdom and Asvaghosa endows the ministers of the ideal as Suddhodana with necessary qualities. The law of inheritance is also mentioned in the epic where after the death of a property owner the wealth was inherited by his legal heirs.

We get various information in the Buddhacarita in respect of the education system of the time of Asvaghosa. Prince Siddhartha gets educated in various branches of learning such as archery, military science etc. Asvaghosa shows special courtesy and honour towards Brahmanas, teachers, parents and guests. Sage Asita’s visit to Suddhodana may be cited as an example. The women at that time received high respect from all classes of people. They used various kinds of ornaments like necklace, Suvrnasutra, Kantasutra, Monikundala, Bhujapasha etc, the poem reflects several references of the existence of painters, sculptures. Asvaghosa has not written in detail about the Upanayana in this epic but he has mentioned the custom of the initiation to the rite called Upanayana. Jatakarma or birth ceremony of a son, marriage, sacrifices etc. were performed according to the traditional Sastras. Existence of Brahmanical asceticism, Saiva ascetics, Vaishnavas has inferred from the verses. The poet does not mention different varieties of cereals but has mentioned as cereal food in general as Anna. There are references of ‘Somarasa’ as intoxicating drink. Asvaghosa’s knowledge of vedas, vedangas, samkhya philosophy, epics, sastra
and astravidhya, grammar, astronomy, astrology etc. and their depiction in his kavyas is a sufficient testimony to the prevalent education of the era. A study of all these aspects is given briefly in the thesis.

In this thesis a critical and thoughtful study has been presented as far as possible to analyze the qualities of a ‘great poem’. A critical analysis of his writing style and also about the quality of the Buddhacarita has been studied elaborately with various aspects of poetry keeping in mind. Under this thesis a critical and thoughtful study has been presented as far as possible to analyze the qualities of a ‘great poem’. Has Asvaghosa successfully expressed his theme? Has he written a good poem or a great poem? Has Buddhacarita satisfies all the norms of a Mahakavya laid down by the rhetoricians. All the queries have been examined under these chapters in the light of a salient features of a Mahakavya.

It is said that the subject matter of a Mahakavya must be historical and the hero should be of some good or great personage. The subject matter of the Buddhacarita is considered as historical as we get in the work the description of the great King Suddhodana who was of Sakya dynasty. The hero of the Kavya is Gautama Buddha and he belongs to great personage. As required by the rules for a classical Mahakavya, the Buddhacarita has also been written in the cantos and there are altogether 28 cantos. At the end of each
canto the poet has changed the meter and the hero of the Kavya has been chosen from the famous Sakya dynasty. There is an indication of the subject matter of the next canto at the end of each canto. Like other classical Mahakavyas, the work is also enriched with the description of the cities, seasons, the rising and the setting of the sun, battle, counsel, birth of princes etc. in the Buddhacarita we come across the sentiment of Santarasa as the main sentiment. The prince Siddhartha left the palace and his dear ones including his wife and his son in order to get enlightenment. Here we get the elements of Santarasa. Besides in the descriptions of hermitage, penance grove etc shows depiction of Santarasa. Also in the different cantos of Buddhacarita the sentiment of Sringara has been depicted as a subsidiary sentiment. In addition to these characteristics of Mahakavyas, we have got the description of the birth of princes in the Buddhacarita, Gautama Buddha and his son Rahula.

From the above discussion it is evident that though it is a work of poetical narrative of heroic character and deeds, yet it is not a composition of the type of the Great Epics, The Ramayana and The Mahabharata which are classified as Itihasas. Though Buddhacarita is not included in the list of Great Epics yet it can be acclaimed as a Mahakavya as it satisfies almost all the prescribed norms. The whole poem is written in Vaidharbhi style. Undoubtedly, Buddhacarita is a marvellous work and an excellent kavya too. Lastly
we can conclude that through Buddhacarita, we have indeed for the first time an actual epic of Buddha composed by a real poet. Who filled with intense love and reverence for the great figure of Buddha, is able to present the life and doctrine of Master one in noble and artistic way. It appears that Buddhacarita bears all the necessary qualities of Mahakavya. The picture of the pleasures of love drawn by Asvaghosa point out his greatness as a writer. He draws touching pictures of nature in his work. Asvaghosa set up a standard for the future ‘Mahakavis’ by his Buddhacarita. His rhetorical skill, his knowledge of different Sastras, his mastery over words and phrases place him among the great poets of Sanskrit literature. Asvaghosa was well acquainted with political ideas, ethical codes, traditions and customs of ancient India. Asvaghosa’s words are not merely poetic but also embody a social philosophy adumbrated in the Smritis and practiced by the people at large. Asvaghosa was well acquainted with poetic ideas, ethical codes, traditions and customs, polity of ancient India. His Buddhacarita, a poem in Sanskrit occupies a prominent place in Buddhist and Sanskrit literature. Without the study of Buddhacarita the knowledge about the life and philosophy of Buddha cannot be thought of complete. With its poetic beauty and literary merits the Buddhacarita receives attention from the readers.
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