

Analysing a Vernacular Literature - Padmavati: History or Fiction

Jyotsna Srivastava

Guest Lecturer, Abhyudaya, Government of Uttar Pradesh

Abstract

Vernacular literature has a lot of potential in historical reconstruction of past. Padmavati, written by sufi saint Malik Muhammad Jayasi, is one relevant source in this regard. It has element of both masnavi (romantic poem) and epic. Cultural assimilation and intermingled ideologies across two dominant religion of the time can be seen. Medieval ages in India was a site of constant changes, proliferation and culture flowing through recitation of texts. The paper deals with the potential a Vernacular source can have in understanding past.

Keywords: Authenticity, vernacular, assimilation, regional languages, masnavi, premakhyan, Royal patronage.

‘Padmavati’, written by Malik Muhammad Jayasi falls under the category of literary works popularly known as ‘Premakhayans’. This is in the form of a long romantic poem depicting the love story of Padmavati and Ratansen. Lacking the general historical sense/element and written in popular language, works like Padmavati are to be considered as the vernacular sources of the period. British historians used the official records and literature to extract the information about the past and based on these insights they wrote history of India. The legacy of ignoring the vernacular literature was carried out until recent past. In the dearth of official accounts about the general public, however, historians are now looking forward to the available vernacular literature of the time. Their authenticity as a historical source, undoubtedly can be questioned on various grounds but (if not the actual content of the literature) the writing skills employed in by the author, his association with general public, patronage extended, etc. can surely provide us with interestingly useful insights of the society contemporary to the period author was writing it. In the present paper, I endeavor to analyze Padmavati as a vernacular source. This will deal with the question of how relevant it can be to understand the socio-political institutions prevailing, through the vocabulary used, literary style followed, targeted readers/audience and most importantly the reach of the work in different section of the society.

Before we move onto the book itself, it becomes undeniably essential to discuss the conditions under which it was written and also on the author’s association with general public. This will eventually help us in having a clearer understanding of the context and the possible objectives of such a work of literature. Malik Muhammad Jayasi was a Sufi saint of Chisti Silsilah. Sufi saints of the period are often considered as the historical agents of Indian Islamic literary culture. They kept distance from the royal court and generally attracted interest of both Muslim and Hindu followers because of their secular spiritual leanings. Jayasi wrote ‘Padamvati’ in Awadhi. (Probably the intention was to reach out to a wider audience. This,

however, is debatable). Nevertheless, one can also find the Persian influence on Jayasi's work at many instances. 'Padmavati', thus, gained popularity among different sections of society.

One can find a number of similarities in the literary pattern followed by the Sufi saints while writing Premakhayans. Maulana Daud's 'Chandayan' served as a model or formula for an entire regional tradition of Indian Sufi poetry. Following which, Qutban's 'Mrigavati', Malik Muhammad Jayasi's 'Padmavati' and Mir Sayyid Manjhan Rajgiri's 'Madhumalati' falls, more or less, under the same influence. All four poets use the same metre and form and all draw on the conventions of the Persian masnavi to frame their romances with introductory prologues. In these prologues there is first praise of God, then of Muhammad and the first four 'righteous' Caliphs, then praise for the king of the period and the author's immediate patron, then praise and thanks to the author's spiritual guide followed by a disclaimer of the poet's own poetic skills.¹ Likewise, there is an image and vivid description of divine beauty. After the initial contact of the hero with this image, he eventually suffers from *viraha*, the pain of love in separation. In this way, we can say all the four stories progressing to completion following the same path.

Jayasi wrote 'Padmavati' in c. 1540. It was the period in which royal patronage was extended to scholars of different religion. The Turkish and Afghan courts of the fourteenth, fifteenth and sixteenth centuries fostered the growth of regional literary, musical and artistic identities. Poets at these courts forged a distinctively Indian Islamic aesthetic culture using models and element from Persian and Arabic literary and religious traditions as well as from Sanskrit and regional languages.² Thus, literature of this period makes it clearly evident that the court was secular in nature. This, however, is not accepted by some scholars like Aziz Ahmad, who is against the idea of cultural assimilation happening in this specific period of the Indian history. Aziz Ahmad talks about the epics and counter-epics and explain that there were Muslim authors writing under official/court patronage and in response to which Hindu authors turned up with counter-epics showing their psychological resistance.³ This idea easily be challenged by the very fact that there existed Muslim sufi saints like Malik Muhammad Jayasi who wrote story of Ratansen's love quest for Padmavati. Not only this, there are many points at which we can feel the influence of both the Persian tradition and Sanskrit tradition of writing in Jayasi's work, which I will be highlighting and discussing in the following paragraphs.

As far as the question of cultural assimilation is concerned, the very detailing of certain events of the story and the pattern in which the story progressed can in itself help us to reach at a certain conclusion. In the preface of 'Padmavati', Malik Muhammad Jayasi, as already discussed, details the greatness of God, King, Caliphs, his own spiritual guide and his poetic skills. Here, we can see the Persian influence of masnavi tradition on the writings of Jayasi. Moving ahead we can find Jayasi giving geographical description of Simhala-dvipa. This seems more of putting down his imagination on paper. The over-laudatory description of Simhala-dvipa involves frequent comparisons to the beauty and grandeur of mountain Kailash (the mount of heaven).

"when a man approacheth this land, 'tis as though he approacheth Kailasa (the mount of heaven)."

Describing the mighty emperor of Simhala and his empire again many references were made from Hindu scriptures. For instance, he made a comparison among Gandharvasena with Ravana. This informs us about Jayasi's knowledge of Sanskrit and Hindu scriptures which would have been possible because of his association and interaction with Hindu scholars of the time.

Story of Padmavati and Ratansen began with the accounts of their birth and foretelling of their future. Padmavati was the most beautiful woman on the planet with extraordinary knowledge of Vedas.

Gandharvasena, out of his ego, thought that no one could stand his might and be a match for Padmavati. In her years of youth, Padmavati sit lonely in despair and share her feelings with her parrot Hiranman. The parrot was a pundit as he learnt Vedas with Padmavati. Once, parrot asked her to allow him to go for a search of a compatible match for her. This, when came in the knowledge of Gandharvasena, increased the trouble for parrot. Initially Padmavati managed to not let him leave but at an opportune moment the parrot, fearing death, eloped into the jungle, where he was trapped and sold to a Brahmin merchant who eventually brought him to the court of Ratansen. His extraordinary excellence and qualities made the king buy him. When asked by Nagmati, who was Ratansen's wife, if there was a woman more beautiful than her, parrot laughed and told her about the incredibly beautiful Padmavati. Nagmati ordered the parrot to be killed as she feared of him telling Ratansen about Padmavati. Hiranman was, however, not killed. Instead, he was brought to the king and on being asked by the king, he gave a vivid description of the beauty that Padmavati was.

The relevance of the description provided by Hiranman cannot be overlooked both in the sense of how story further progressed and also the symbolism that the author is trying to associate with this part of his work. After hearing about Padmavati, Ratansen was left astounded and ultimately gave up every materialistic luxury of life just to turn into a yogi and leave in search of Padmavati. He crossed the oceans and reached to Simhala, where he stayed in a temple and meditated until he saw Padmavati. On seeing her, Ratansen fainted and got back to senses only to find a message by Padmavati and not her. Agitated Ratansen decided to sacrifice his life. Ratansen's intense yogic practices, however, made Goddess Pravati and God Mahesh to come on earth and help. On passing the test by Parvati, he was revealed the way to reach to Padmavati. After all the confrontations with Gandharvasena, Ratansen and Padmavati got married.

This part of the work seems to be influenced by or simply followed the masnavi tradition of writing- long romantic poem with spiritual allegory attached. As also noted by Aziz Ahmad, this part of the story is straight forward romance, without any epic element.⁴ Description of the Padmavati is associated with the divine God. And, for the communion with God the path that has to be followed involves giving up all worldly luxuries and taking up yogic practices.⁵ This symbolism associated with the love quest of Ratansen, is just the one way out of many other ways in which the 'Padmavati' was read and interpreted by the people from different section of society.

Moving ahead, we can also find the influence of *Barah-masa* tradition of writing in Jayasi's 'Padmavati'. He also shows the various emotions associated with different seasons of the years, while writing about the pain of separation being suffered by Nagamati. Earlier Padmavati is showing enjoying spring with her loved one by her side. Nagamati, on the other side shattered in the pain of separation is crying her heart out.

"Bhadon comes, hard to endure and very burden-some: how shall I pass the dark nights. My house is empty and my beloved lives elsewhere..."

Barah-masa tradition is another important instance of influence of Hindu literary practices.

At this point of the story starts the second part which seems to have general elements of epic, written during this particular time. While returning from Simhala-dvipa, Ratansen was gifted six highly precious items by Lakshmi, Samudra's daughter. Later in the scene one can see the banishment of Raghava-Chetan, priest at the court of Ratansen. Realizing the possible consequences of dissatisfied Raghava-Chetan, Padmavati decided to call him and gifted her one precious bangle. Padmavati's reflection made

him lose all his senses. Getting back to normal Raghava-Chetan decided to avenge his insult by going Dilli and telling Alauddin Khilji about Padmavati.

On Ratansen's refusal to the offers extended against Padmavati, Alauddin declared war, which was later negotiated by Alauddin Khilji getting five precious items from Ratansen. However, it was just a plot by Alauddin and on seeing the reflection of Padmavati he went on to take Ratansen as prisoner to Dilli. Eventually, with the support of Gora and Badal, Ratansen eloped to take revenge from Devapal, who eyed on Padmavati in the absence of Ratansen. In this war, he sacrificed his life following which both the queens Padmavati and Nagmati committed sati.

This second part of Jayasi's poem, according to Aziz Ahmad, assumes the form of an epic with an allegorical clue.⁶ Thus, we can see, more or less, an equal influence of both Persian and Sanskrit tradition on Malik Muhammad Jayasi's writing. Most importantly, above discussed instances very efficiently challenge Aziz Ahmad view against cultural assimilation during this time. There was assimilation, penetration of ideologies and ideas cross the religious orders. Secular nature of Sufi tradition is clearly evident. Sheldon Pollock uses the word 'cosmopolitan' for the rich and interactive mixture of vernacular and classical languages, which was a part of a court sponsored aesthetic culture.

After much debate and deliberation scholars have accepted the fact that Jayasi wrote 'Padmavati' in Awadhi.⁷ This information in itself can prove to be inevitably relevant and essential for us to analyze possible objectives of this work and the effect it had on the readers. The Mughal authors who chose to write in Hindi were overwhelmingly Sufi in their religious affiliations. This has led some scholars like Richard M. Eaton to speculate that Hindi Sufi literature was overwhelmingly a literature of conversion, written by elite, Persian speaking Sufi authors to enable them to reach out to the rural Hindus. It was a literature which, according to these scholars was demotic in its orientation, and because of this it was an ideal medium for enhanced communication with, and the gradual conversion of Hindus.⁸

The basis for such an argument could have been that the symbolism associated with these romantic poets depicting the love-quest for a divine beauty, was a way in which these Sufi saints propagated their religious ideas and used a medium through which they attracted the attention of a wider public and made them feel connected to it. According to A.G. Shirreff, however, Jayasi's objective is to tell a tale of love and he even doubted the fact that Jayasi had any definite allegory present to his mind throughout.⁹

An alternate explanation for this assimilation of literary traditions can also be forwarded. For instance, following *Barah-masa* tradition in such literary work to show the emotions of the heroine (nayika) respective of the months, can certainly be the influence of Hindu literary tradition on the Persian port but at the same time it do not, in any sense, confirms to the fact that this had objective of to show the gender relations existing in the society. The Persian counter-part to the *Barah-masa* was *gazel*, which was never gender-biased i.e. it never necessarily showed nayika as the lover who waits for her (male) love.¹⁰ To simply show the conditions of the women in a Hindu society this transformation in the literary tradition was a much required one. Thus, this can also be a reason to use vocabulary or language that better portray the conditions prevailing in the society.

We can ultimately infer and be certain of that the period contemporary to which 'Padmavati' was being written was that of cultural assimilation. The royal court extended patronage to the scholars with different religious affiliations, making it possible to have rich cultural literature. There was an active interaction between the scholars of different religion which led to the exchange and to an extent penetration of religious ideologies into each other's spectrum of religious beliefs. Linguistics is of utmost importance-

vocabulary used and choice of writing in a vernacular language is too important to ignore in analyzing 'Padmavati' as a source for historical reconstruction. Possibly there could have been a number of reasons to come up with such a work- perhaps to reach out to wider public or to propagate ritual ideas through the symbolism associated with story or even to expand the ideological influence of Islam and increasing the following or simply to use a language that has a vocabulary, which can portray the situation better when compared to employing the words of Persian to explain that very situation. Thus, to conclude one can say that a vernacular source, like that of 'Padmavati', can be of undeniable relevance in the historical reconstruction of the past. If not the actual content or the very story of Padmavati and Ratansen, which could have been half real and half imaginative, the literary style of this work can definitely make us have useful insights about the society and culture of the time.

Footnotes

1. A. Behl & S. Weightman, *Madhumalati: An Indian Sufi Romance*, Oxford, OUP, 2001, P.xiii.
2. Ibid.
3. A. Ahmad, 'Epic and Counter-Epic in Medieval India', *Journal of the American Oriental Society*, Vol. 83, No. 4, 1963, P.470.
4. Ibid. P. 475.
5. A. Behl & S. Weightman, *Madhumalati: An Indian Sufi Romance*, Oxford, OUP, 2001, P. xiii- xiv.
6. A. Ahmad, 'Epic and Counter-Epic in Medieval India', *Journal of the American Oriental Society*, Vol. 83, No. 4, 1963, P.475.
7. Ibid.
8. Shantanu Phukan, 'Through throats where many rivers meet': *The Ecology of Hindi in the World of Persian*, *The Indian Economic and Social History Review*, Vol 38, 1, 2001, P.38.
9. A.G. Shireff, *Padmavati*, Calcutta, The Royal Asiatic Society of Bengal, 1944, P. viii.
10. Shantanu Phukan, 'Through throats where many rivers meet': *The Ecology of Hindi in the World of Persian*, *The Indian Economic and Social History Review*, Vol 38, 1, 2001, P.38-48.

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3. Behl, Aditya. *Love's Subtle Magic: An Indian Islamic Literary Tradition, 1379-1545*, OUP, 2013.
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