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On the Threshold of Modern Hindi Drama? A Few Remarks on *Ānand Raghunandan*

Abstract

Among numerous retellings of the story of the deeds of Rām we find a drama in prose and verse in Braj by Viśvanāth Sinh (1789-1854), *Ānand Raghunandan* (*Blissful Raghunandan*; c. 1840?), which is often referred to as the first Hindi drama. It is also frequently claimed that Viśvanāth Sinh was the first author in Hindi literature to introduce prose to drama and to divide his work into acts. Some authors are also of the opinion that *Ānand Raghunandan* is the first Hindi work, in which the tradition of Sanskrit drama was revived. It is, therefore, astonishing that this work, having a number of other interesting features, has till now received relatively little attention despite its seemingly important place in the history of Hindi literature. In this article, we seek to scrutinise the validity of such opinions about this drama in the light of a close examination of its text.

1. Introductory remarks

When studying the beginnings of modern Hindi literature, one realises that Rām-kathā, the story of Rām's life so vibrantly depicted by Vālmīki in his *Rāmāyaṇa*, as well as by many later authors, including Tulsīdās with his famous *Rām-carit-mānas*, was also an interesting subject for those who were creatively active in the still pre-modern period, i.e. in the second half of the eighteenth century and the first half of the nineteenth century. The oldest specimens of relatively mature literary prose in Kharī-bolī, i.e. Daulatrām's *Padma-purāṇa* (c. 1765) and Rāmprasād 'Nirañjanī's' *Yoga-vasiṣṭha* (1798) or the somewhat later *Rām-caritra* (1805) by Sadal Miśra, an employee of the famous Fort William College in Calcutta, can serve here as the best examples.¹ The interest in Rām-kathā as a source or even the basis of subject matter also holds true in the case of drama, where most often

¹ For more on the discussion of the dates of these works, see Vedalankar 1969: 22-25 and Stasik 2000: 208-209.

Viśvanāth Siṃh's work entitled *Ānand Raghunandan* [Nāṭak] is referred to as the first Hindi drama (*hindī pratham nāṭak*).² In view of the relatively small amount of attention devoted to this work and its seemingly important place in the history of Hindi literature, it is worthwhile investigating how well-founded such contentions are.

Viśvanāth Siṃh (1789³-1854⁴) was the maharaja of Rīvā, a princely state not far from Citrakūt, which became an important pilgrimage centre for the Rām cult in the nineteenth century. He was a prolific writer and an ardent Rām-bhakta, initiated into esoteric Rām-bhakti, i.e. Rām-rasik sampradaya, which he supported generously, thus promoting its development (Siṃh 1957: 431-433 and Śarmā 1972: 41). He wrote in Hindi (mainly Braj with admixtures of Baghelī; Siṃh 1957: 434) but is also recognised, much the same as, somewhat later, his son, Raghurāj Siṃh (1833-1879⁵), as one of the most important authors of his times writing in Sanskrit. Many works are ascribed to Viśvanāth Siṃh⁶ but the most important of them in the annals of Hindi literature is his above-mentioned drama in prose and verse in Braj – *Ānand Raghunandan* (*Blissful Raghunandan*). Thanks to this Viśvanāth Siṃh is referred to as the first author in Hindi literature who introduced prose to drama and divided his work into acts. Although in so doing he was referring to the tradition of Sanskrit drama, one should remember that it was a new step in the field of Hindi literature, where – due to socio-political and religious reasons – drama was not cultivated as a literary genre, practically till the nineteenth century. Therefore *Ānand Raghunandan* is often considered to be the first drama in the Hindi language.

2. *Ānand Raghunandan*: its plot, structure and dramatis personae

The exact date of *Ānand Raghunandan*, published for the first time in 1871 in Benares by Lāyḍ yantraṇālay (AR: i; cf. Ojhā 1975: 283 and McGregor 1984: 170), is not known. According to some authors, it was written in the last decade of Viśvanāth Siṃh's life (AR: v), but according to others, it was composed some fifteen to twenty-five years before his death (Miśra 1972: 555 but see also 545).

The drama is divided into seven acts; six of them retell the deeds of Rām as known from tradition, and the seventh, the last of them, depicts life at his court; especially here the influence of Rām-rasik sampradaya ideology is apparent – the act is full of dancing, singing and impressive descriptions of different types of heroines (*nāyikā bheda*; AR: 140-151).

² Śukla 1961: 310, 328 and 439; the title page of AR, AR: i, ii, ix and xii; Snātak 1996: 172; Miśra 1972: 282; cf. McGregor 1984: 170 and Varmā 1986: 34. For more on the discussion of other works sometimes referred to as the earliest Hindi dramas, see e.g. Śarmā 1972: 167-168 and 315-316; cf. also Sanādhya 1961: 97-99 and 113.

³ Siṃh 1957: 431 and AR: ii. Miśra (1972: 282) gives the year 1786.

⁴ AR: ii; cf. Śukla 1961: 327, where Śukla, dating the reign of Viśvanāth Siṃh as 1778-1797, most probably makes the same mistake as in the case of the date of Rāmprasād's *Yoga-vasiṣṭha*, i.e. he confuses the AD years with the years of the Vikram era (*samvat*); cf. Vedalkar 1969: 22-25 and Stasik 2000: 208-209.

⁵ Siṃh 1957: 470 and 471; McGregor 1984: 171; Varmā 1986: 468. Cf. Śukla 1961: 554.

⁶ Different sources enumerate up to 40 titles; see e.g. AR: iii; Siṃh 1957: 434-435; Miśra 1972: 283 and Śarmā 1972: 40.

The plot has a very interesting ending complying with the spirit of rasik sampraday – Rām hands down his duties to his brothers, entrusting Bharat with administration of the kingdom, Lakṣmaṇ with its finances and giving Śatrughna command of the army. He does this with the intention of enjoying himself at his court.⁷

It is usually said that the basic story follows the *Rām-carit-mānas* but it seems more appropriate to see in it one of many retellings of the traditional story, in which – when compared with Tulsīdās' work – some episodes have been omitted, others shortened, still others extended, and some unconventional solutions introduced. The drama clearly betrays an interest in different episodes than its great predecessor. For example, Viśvanāth Simh did not mention the sacrifice of Daśarath at all; to the birth of Rām and his brothers and to their childhood he devoted only one verse. The events relating to Rām's investiture as Crown Prince and the intrigue, which prevented it and led to his banishment, are fashioned as a dialogue between two rivers, the Gaṅgā and Yamunā. At the same time, much attention and space have been devoted to the episode of Rām's stay in Citrakūt and, even to a greater extent, to the war on Laṅkā. The author also introduced into his drama the voice from heaven (*ākāś-vāṇī*; indicated in the text as *ākāśe*), a traditional device that is used to foretell some events and complement others.

Rām, the protagonist of *Ānand Raghunandan*, received the name Hitkāṛī, meaning literally 'Benefactor' (from Latin *bene facere* 'to do good'). He is portrayed as God, the Supreme Being, who shows, first of all, his human countenance; he is God who has descended to earth in order to change it into heaven (*Digśir daran, ran karan, sarva-bhūt hita-kārī, param puruṣ avatare*; AR: 40; cf. also AR: xxxix-xliii). It should be noted that this very interesting trait of the character of Rām anticipates the direction in which it evolved in the first half of the twentieth century in such works as Maithilīśaraṇ Gupta's *Sāket* (1932) (Stasik 2002 and 2004).

Ānand Raghunandan may be viewed as a product of diversified sources and a relatively late culture. It is evident especially in the form of peculiar, allegoric names, such as: Hitkāṛī (Rām), Digjān (Daśarath), Ḍīl Dharādhar (Lakṣmaṇ), Ḍaḥḍaḥ Jagakārī (Bharat), Jagadyonija (Vasiṣṭha), Bhuvan Hit (Viśvāmītra), Sugāl (Hanumān), Dikśīr (Rāvaṇ), or Bhayānak (Vibhīṣaṇ). These names, although in principle related to the most typical features of Rām-kathā characters or their deeds, make it difficult to follow the plot easily; they have even been criticised as a futile and tasteless effort (Sanāḍhya 1961: 105-106).

We can safely acknowledge that major flaws in the construction of the drama stem, firstly, from the accumulation of events – in a relatively small work of 153 pages, the entire story of Rām's deeds has been retold; secondly, from the plethora of characters – there are 32 main male characters and 8 female characters. The plot, therefore, seems very tangled and confusing and is additionally complicated by the unusual names of the characters. The audience, be they readers or the potential theatre public, would also have

⁷ *Ḍaḥḍaḥ Jagakārī tum rājya kī tatbīr karo. Ḍīl Dharādhar, tum koṣ kī tatbīr karo. Ḍimbhīdar tum senā kī tatbīr karo. Haū gh bāg bihār karan jāv hō.* (AR: 152)

to face the use of different stylistic language registers.⁸ Rather scanty stage directions in Sanskrit and Sanskritised solemn phrases are mixed with Braj, the predominant language of this work, and elements of other dialects and languages, e.g. Kharī-bolī, Persian, and even Arabic and English (Act 7).⁹ Taking all this into consideration, a tough critic may say that *Ānand Raghunandan* is more interesting as a linguistic testimony of its own times than as a piece of belles lettres. However, the above-mentioned fact seems very important here, namely, this drama contains interesting material from the point of view of the development of the Rāmāyaṇa tradition, as it anticipates the direction of the evolution of the figure of Rām in the twentieth century. Above all, it prepared the ground for the further development of Hindi drama.

3. *Ānand Raghunandan* as the first Hindi drama. An appraisal

Different authors are almost unanimous in claiming that *Ānand Raghunandan* is the first Hindi work, in which the tradition of Sanskrit drama was revived, though some of them are in favour of the opinion that was first voiced by Bharatendu Hariścandra. He maintained that the first attempt of this nature was made by Gopālcandra alias Giridhardās, i.e. Bharatendu's father, in his drama entitled *Nahūṣ*, written in Braj probably some time between 1840 and 1859 (Śukla 1961: 439; Sanāḍhya 1961: 97 and Śarmā 1972: 168-170; cf. AR: iii). According to Hariścandra, the division into acts and other devices introduced in *Ānand Raghunandan* cannot compensate for the fact that its language is dominated by verse, and therefore this work cannot be considered as a drama (Śarmā 1972: 168-169). Such an opinion betrays two facts. Firstly, thinking about the arrangement into acts and the dramatic devices implemented in Viśvanāth Siṃh's work, Bharatendu meant exclusively the tradition of Sanskrit drama, dispensing with different indigenous forms of religious or popular drama such as *rām-līlā*, *rās-līlā*, *naṭṭāṅkī* or *svāḡ*. Secondly, stressing the necessity of the use of prose, he seems to be much under the influence of European, i.e. English, drama and even theatre, which he had certainly become familiar with (Śarmā 1972: 167). However, his opinion does not seem to give sufficient credit to the author of *Ānand Raghunandan*.

It is commonly known and repeated that Viśvanāth Siṃh divided his work into acts. However, a close investigation of the text proves that using such stage directions as *iti niṣkrāntaḥ sarve* followed by *saparikara devī praveśaḥ* (AR: 8) he actually subdivided the acts into scenes (AR: xxxi). Furthermore, he also regularly introduced other Sanskrit *didaskalīa* and such scenic devices as off-stage lines, e.g. in order to inform the audience about the birth of Rām and his brothers (AR: 4), or a voice/voices from heaven (*ākāśe*). The drama also begins in a very conventional way with invocatory verses addressed to deities (*nandī*), after which the stage-manager (*sūtra-dhār*) and his assistants (*māriṣ* and *paripārśvak*) enter the stage. Thus it becomes obvious that Viśvanāth Siṃh followed more

⁸ Cf. Varmā 1986: 34.

⁹ E.g. AR: 151; cf. also AR: lxxiii and McGregor 1984: 170-171.

than one aspect of the tradition of Sanskrit drama. His work also draws our attention to some other performing traditions. It seems probable that the (explicit) lack of the division of the text into scenes might be influenced by *rām-līlā* and *rās-līlā* performances, in which the change of place and time is announced by means of dialogue (cf. AR: xxxii).

As far as the use of prose and verse in *Ānand Raghunandan* is concerned, we cannot deny that Viśvanāth Siṃh made ample use of verse in it, but also it cannot be denied that the dialogues are almost entirely in prose. Subsequent authors, including Bharatendu Hariścandra himself, employed a similar combination!

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Let us sum up the preceding discussion. Thanks to the above-mentioned features of *Ānand Raghunandan*, i.e. the way it is built and how the plot is constructed, it seems reasonable to consider it as the first drama written in the Hindi region, in which its author made ample use of the traditional rules of Sanskrit drama, laid out as early as the *Nāṭya-śāstra*. Neither can one overlook other influences, especially of folk theatre traditions, however scanty they may be. Apart from this, of great importance is the way in which Viśvanāth Siṃh moulded the character of Rām that was subsequently further developed in important literary works in Hindi, such as Gupta's *Sāket*. Considering this a meaningful contribution of *Ānand Raghunandan* to the development of Hindi literature (cf. also Sanādhyā 1961: 105), nevertheless, I would prefer to avoid calling it "the first Hindi drama", a claim that may be, and often is, misunderstood as "the first **modern** Hindi drama". Both the time of its creation and, to an even greater extent, its major language, i.e. Braj, testify against such labelling. Some critics would also like to add here the subject matter of this work but that would evidently be a blunder, as in Hindi literature we have many decidedly modern works which use mythological/epic narratives (cf. e.g. Śarmā 1972: 166).

And finally we return to the question posed in the title of this paper. The answer to it is, in my opinion, that with Mahārājā Viśvanāth Siṃh's work we stand on the threshold of modern Hindi drama, *Ānand Raghunandan* being a very interesting specimen of a pre-modern work, which highlights many traits taken up and developed by conscious and unconscious followers of Viśvanāth Siṃh. One fact in this context, however, cannot be denied – *Ānand Raghunandan* is the first drama in the Hindi ramaite tradition (cf. Siṃh 1957: 434).

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