

THE SANSKRIT NOVEL AVINĀŚI AS A POLITICAL NOVEL

Hiramonī Goswami

Avināśi, a novel in the world of Sanskrit literature, has come out from the genius mind of the great scholar Biswanarayan Shastri. Shastri, who hailed from a remote village of Narayanpur in the district of Lakhimpura in the sacred land of Assam in 1925. He has glorified his mother land through his great contributions to the different branches of Sanskrit. The scholar's critical editions of *Yoginītantra*, *Kāmākhyaṅtantra*, *Tīrthakaumudī* and *Ānandalaharī*, English rendering of *Kālikapurāṇa* etc. have been well received by the scholars of India as well as abroad. Biswanarayan Shastri has secured a great place in the creative literature of Sanskrit by composing the unique historical Sanskrit novel *Avināśi* in 1986. It is worthy to be mentioned here that for this authentic work Shastri has received a good number of awards too. Although the title itself indicates that the theme of the novel is related to the immortal love of the hero and heroine but there is a strong political story line too. The main aim of this paper is to highlight the political surroundings of the time of king Bhāskaravarmā and thus to establish the work as a political narrative in the format of a novel.

The primary get up of work *Avināśi*, establishes it as a historical and social novel in support of which many scholars have extended their opinion that *Avināśi* is a historical and social novel. At the very outset we must have to state that the veteran rhetoricians of Sanskrit have not indicated particular norms for novels. But after observing the characteristics of Nātakas Mahākāvya etc. scholars have unanimously considered *Avināśi* as a modern novel¹. The author has collected materials for this novel from the original Sanskrit works like Bāṇa's *Harṣacarita*, Dāmodaragupta's *Kuṭṭanimata*, Kālhana's *Rājatanangīnī* and also from the book *The life of Huen Chwang* by Beal. This novel is based on an important event of Indian history that took place in the first half of the seventh

century A.D. The time frame of the story of the *Avināśī* belongs to the period of Bhāskaravarmā, the famous king of Kāmarūpa. In this novel we come across some historical personalities like Susthitavarmā, Supratiṣṭhitavarmā, Bhāskaravarmā, Harṣavardhana ect. and these characters are projected more elegantly in the expert hands of the author. Apart from this, the author also skillfully depicts some fictional characters like Mādhavī, Devasvāmī, Mālatī, Mādhava etc here. Shastri has also dealt with the love story of Mālatī and Mādhava that has a direct impact on the happenings and developments of the main theme of the novel *Avināśī*. The major portion of the work rolls around the love story between Bhāskaravarmā, the hero and Mādhavī, the heroine. The author has also entitled this novel as *Avināśī* on the basis of the immortal love of Mādhavī towards her beloved Bhāskaravarmā which she has expressed in many places of the work². Shastri, giving emphasis on this immortal and eternal love, arranges many places in the novel to assert his opinion regarding this mental condition. For instance, the female ascetic, who gives shelter to helpless Mādhavī, delivers a sympathetic speech to Mādhavī on spiritual love as Mādhavī is eagerly waiting to meet her beloved Bhāskaravarmā. The female ascetic tells Mādhavī that the immortal soul never dies with the mortal body, soul is eternal and eternal love also originates from this kind of soul and Mādhavī should think about prince Bhāskara living at distance and should offer her eternal love from here³. Certainly, this is the author's concept on love expressed in the speech of the female ascetic and it also indicates his one of the mottos which he wants to establish throughout the whole novel *Avināśī*. Although the very title of the novel implies that the theme of the novel is about the eternal love of Mādhavī towards the Prince but the story of the work seems to be more related to the political circumstances of ancient Assam. The story of the work frequently rolls round the happenings of King Bhāskaravarmā's defeat and reinstallation in the kingdom there after. Thus the story of the novel strictly bears a political fervor.

The lineage of the kings of Prāgjyotiṣapura had been recorded in various sources like the inscriptions, copper plates, manuscripts etc. which impart us with authentic information regarding the political and social backgrounds of that time. *The Nidhānpur copper*

plates of *Bhāskaravarmā* which was written at the patronage of king *Bhāskaravarmā*, records the succession of Bhauma dynasty starting with Naraka and goes up to *Bhāskara*. All the historical characters that we come across in the novel *Avināśi* are described in the *Nidhānpur grant* in connection with their legislative victory. *Susthitavarmā*, has introduced in this grant as a *Mṛgānka*⁴ who held the kingdom by dint of his own arm⁵. In the *Harsacarita* *Bāṇa* also states that *Susthiravarmā* was famous as *Mṛgānka* among the general and calls him as a *mahārājādhirāja*.⁶ The indologist P.C. Choudhury after critically analyzing the *Doobi grant* has opined that if the system of chronology accepted for him (A.D. 585-93) appears reasonable, his reign saw the rise of a new power in the west. The political condition of Northern India assumed a new phase about this time.⁷ N.N. Acharyya praises this king of Bhauma dynasty as “*Susthita-Varman*, although defeated was a famous King. The “*Later Guptas*” regarded their victory over him as a great triumph.”⁸ Another historical character of the novel *Avināśi* is *Supratiṣṭhitavarmā*. The projection of *Supratiṣṭhita* in this novel shows some deviations from others. In this novel we find that *Supratiṣṭhita* died of an injury received in fighting against enemies and he doesn’t get the chance to become the king of *Prāgjyotiṣapura*. But most of the indologists have stated that *Supratiṣṭhivarmā* had ruled the capital before his premature death. Edward Gait states that *Susthitavarmā* had left two sons, namely, *Supratiṣṭhitavarmā* and *Bhāskaravarmā* who each became king in turn.⁹ P.C. Choudhury and N.N Acharyya both state that after the death of *Susthitavarmā*, *Supratiṣṭhitavarmā* ascended the throne in 593 A.D.¹⁰ In the *Nidhānpur grant* it is recorded that *Supratiṣṭhitavarmā*’s prosperity was for the benefits of others.¹¹ The indologists explain this statement of *Nidhānpur grant* as that *Bhāskara* might have enjoyed the results of *Supratiṣṭhit*’s activities.¹² The most powerful monarch of the Bhauma dynasty was *Bhāskaravarmā*. Whenever the name of Bhauma dynasty arises the reference of *Bhāskara* comes automatically. P.C Choudhury says that with the accession of *Bhāskaravarmā*, *Kāmarūpa* entered into a new chapter of her history....¹³ Edward Gait also is of opinion that ascending the throne at a time when the reputation of his family was at low ebb, he not only restored it, but made *Kāmarūpa* a new power to be reckoned with.....¹⁴ *Bāna* also

delineates Bhāskara as *sakalottara patīsvara* which means the sovereign of the entire Uttarapātha.¹⁵

The novel *Avināśi* presents us some glorious events of political background of ancient Assam. The story directly deals with the most powerful king of Prāgjyotiṣapura i.e, Bhāskaravarmā who belonged to the dynasty (Bhauma dynasty) founded by Naraka, the son of Bhūmi and Lord Viṣṇu. The Nīdhānpur grant also delineates about this divine origin of Bhauma dynasty¹⁶. Here we come across the familiar historic events of political ups and downs that took place in the kingdom of Bhāskaravarmā in seventh century A.D. There had always been a conflict between Kāmarūpa and Gauḍa that often led to wars and we come to know about this event in the introductory parts of the novel followed by the scene where the author introduces the heroine Mādhavi, who was brought up by Devasvāmī, the chief priest of Mahākāla temple located at the vicinity of river Karotayā¹⁷. Susthitavarmā, the father of Bhāskaravarmā, has been projected as a sincere and dedicated king who got scared when he came to know that the king of Gauḍa had been planning to attack Prāgjyotiṣapura with advanced and powerful armies. Susthitavarmā at that dejected time wanted to ally with the king of Maukhārī but due to the shortage of time he had to send his two sons Supratiṣṭhitavarmā and Bhāskaravarmā with all the power that he had. In this context it is worthy to mention here that in the novel author also gives us information about how a king gets ready for war. As the economic condition of Prāgjyotiṣapura was so poor at that time Aryaguna, the chief minister, had announced a notice¹⁸ embellished with lucid and exaggerative language, in the cities and villages of Prāgjyotiṣapura seeking help and support of inhabitants at that wretched condition. Unfortunately both the princes got captured in the hands of perennial rival Gauḍa and after hearing this pathetic news king Susthitavarmā had expired. In this context the author has delineated the miserable and pitiful condition of the people of Prāgjyotiṣapura which indicates that the happiness and way of life of people of a nation depend on the circumstances and governing system of kings. After hearing the heart touching news of the captivity of two princes and death of their monarch the eyes of the people of Prāgjyotiṣapura used to cover by heavy tears, they frequently used to take respite in conversation and their hearts

excavated with sadness.¹⁹ The lives of people got stuck at such a point that they forgot to do their quotidian works like bathing, eating dressing etc.²⁰ and it was Āryagaṇa who used to give solace the general by saying that very soon both the princes will please them by coming at Prāḡjyotiṣapura.

The story of *Avināsi* turns into a new track when Bhāskaravarmā becomes the king of Prāḡjyotiṣapura after the departure of his elder brother Supratiṣṭhitavarmā. Bhāskaravarmā seems to be an ideal and dedicated king through the projection of the author. This king was fervently waiting for the salvation of the lost portion of his kingdom. Eventually in the North Harṣa, the king of Sthāneśvar had been planning to invade Gauḍa and that brought the desired opportunity to Bhāskaravarmā. Then Bhāskaravarmā had applied the strategy of mutual friendship with Harṣa and they together conquered Gauḍa. Being attacked by the two invading armies Śaśāṅka absconded from his capital and reached Kaliṅga. Bhāskaravarmā was literally as like as his name indicates i.e. a *bhāskara* or the sun. As the sun illuminates the whole world through its light Bhāskaravarmā also used to please the general through the schemes and policies that took during his governance. For instance, after regaining the Gauḍa capita Bhāskaravarmā also ascended his kingdom by conquering Karṇasuvarṇa which was once conquered by Bhūtivarmā, the fifth predecessor of Bhāskara and then recaptured by Śaśāṅka during the reign of Susthitavarmā. Bhāskaravarmā to celebrate his victory issued grant land inscriptions donating land in Candrapura area in Pauṇḍravardhana region of Karṇasuvarṇa to the Brahmins at their request which were once granted to them by Bhūtivarmā.

The author is also seen to give more importance to the political environments throughout the whole novel by founding idealism in some characters. For instance, Bhāskara has been portrayed as the highest figure of idealism as he used to focus on his administrative affairs rather than his personal matters. Bhāskaravarmā loved Mādhavī whom he had taken from the temple of Mahākāla and generally he wanted to spend quality times with her but he never allowed his love to come in the path of his duty. As for example, we can take the scene where it is seen that after the death of Supratiṣṭhitavarmā, Bhāskaravarmā was in dilemma whether he

should first meet Mādhavī who had been enthusiastically waiting for him in the royal harem since her arrival in his kingdom or finish the funeral ceremony of his elder brother. And after the conflict of his inner mind he first chooses his duty towards his brother and kingdom and in this way Bhāskara overlooked his feelings towards Mādhavī by saying that the primary duty of a king is to protect his nation and there is no way for the existence of emotions of heart.²¹ In the *Raghuvamśam* it is said that *rājā prakṛti-ranjanāt*²² which means a king's primary duty or nature is to act for the happiness of general and Bhāskara literally followed it. On the other hand Bhāskara always wanted to anoint Mādhavī as the chief queen but he never fulfilled this aspiration as she is a *devadāsī* and the nobles of the State didn't approve it.²³ It is worthy to note that through this kind of vision of Bhāskaravarmā the author has also skillfully justified the very title of the novel *Avināśī* i.e., immortal love and we know that negligence of duty for the sake of love has never characterized the immortality and divinity of love. Besides this the author has also designed the imaginary characters of the plot according to the requirement of political surroundings which lead the story to the climax. The character of Mālatī is one of those. Mādhavī was appointed as a spy by the king in the disguise of a guard of a water tank. The clever Mālatī had performed as a fake lover of Mādhava who was a spy of the rival empire of Śāśānka and even after losing her chastity in the hand of Mādhava, Mālatī had collected information regarding the power and political backdrops of his country. Undoubtedly, it would not have been so easy for Bhāskara to surmount Gauḍa without the information imparted by Mālatī. Thus this fictional character of Mālatī has an impact in the political development and happenings of the novel *Avināśī*.

Another important point which makes this novel more politically sound is the some administrative guidelines which are added by the author from his own observation where some are even quoted from scriptures like *Arthaśāstra* of Kautilya throughout the whole novel. The author has not only stated the administrative guidelines but also applied those according to the demands and situations of the story. For instance, it is said in the novel that *śatroh śatruḥ kṛtimam mitram bhavati*²⁴ which means enemy's enemy are artificial friends and one of the most important events of the story is the mutual friendship of king Harṣavardhana and

Bhāskaravarmā as both the kings were the rival of king of Gauḍa. Sometimes the author has mentioned some administrative guidelines just to clarify the readers that why those were not followed by the kings although the situation required those. As for example at the situation when the king Susthitavarmā had come to know that the king of Gauḍa had been planning to invade Prāgjyotiṣapura with advanced armies then the powerless king Susthita wanted to negotiate with the rival Śaśāṅka of Gauḍa as per instructed by Kautily like *hīnamānaḥ sandhim kuryāt abhuccīyamāno vigrhñīyāt*.²⁵ But abruptly Susthitavarmā refused to follow this by recalling the pride of the victories of his warrior predecessors like Naraka, Bhūtivarmā who alone conquered Pañcagaḍa and consequently Susthita decided to fight with Gauḍa. There is no doubt that this is a fictional scene which is intelligently presented by the author to support *hīnamāna* Susthita to fight like an *abhuyuccīyamāna*.

On the basis of this study it can be concluded that the *Avināśi* is the story which has a political base connected to the sources already existed. All the fictional twist and turns assimilated by the author here have direct impact to achieve the political goals in any way. It is not contradictory to say that the political background of the novel owes its origin from some historical sources but the strategies and techniques used by the author are more realistic and novel-centric. The teachings and the guidelines of administrative system are one of the significant parts of the novel. One can also apply these techniques and guidelines even in this modern world. Therefore we can say that the novel *Avināśi* which is basically famous as a historical novel can also be treated as a successful political novel even in modern standard.

Notes and References :

- 1 *ayamavināśināmādheya upanyāsa adhunikopanyāśasailigunaiḥ sampannaḥ....., Avināśi*
- 2 *vināśi mama śariraṃ/ avināśi mama prema/ tena vyāpto mama ātmā, privyāptāni angāni, parivyāptam jagat/ śariraṃ diryate śiryate, na cyavate mama prema hanyamāne śarire/ na ko'pi tasya hanyamane samarthah na mahākālo'pi prabhavati....., Avinasi, p. 43*

- 3 *mādhaivi! avināśi ātmā na hanyate hanyamāne śarīre/ śāśvato'yamātmaā/ ātmajaṃ prema api avināśi/ dūrādeva kumārastvayā dhyeyah/ tasmai nivedyatām prema/ ibid. p. 169*
- 4 *...devaḥ susthitavarmā yaḥ khyātaḥ śrīmṛgānka iti/ vide v.18.*
- 5 *...svabāhudhṛtarājya....ibid.*
- 6 *Vide p. 63.*
- 7 *The history of civilization of the people of Assam to the twelfth century A.D., p. 157*
- 8 *Brief History of Assam, p. 30*
- 9 *A History of Assam, p. 25*
- 10 (i) *The history of civilization of the people of Assam to the twelfth century A.D., p.161*
(ii) *Brief History of Assam, p.30*
- 11 *yasyaonnatiḥ parārtha....vide v.21.*
- 12 *The history of civilization of the people of Assam to the twelfth century A.D., p.161*
- 13 *Ibid*
- 14 *A History of Assam, p. 25*
- 15 *Ibid*
- 16 *Vide vs.4-5*
- 17 *karatoyapścime tīre lohini yatra mṛttikā/
muktikṣetraṃ samākhyātāṃ mahāpātakanaśanaṃ//, Tirthakaumudī, p. 65*
- 18 *asyāmapādi ghorāyām samprāpte darune bhaye/
paritrānāya bhavataḥ prārthayiṣye dhanani vaḥ//
pratidāsyē ca bhavatām savrddhikāṃ bhayaḥṣaye/
narayaḥ pratidāsyanti yaddhareyurbalādītaḥ//
kalatramādītaḥ kṛtvā sarvaṃ vo vinaśediti/
api cet putradārthamarthasancaya iṣyate// Avināśi, p. 18*
- 19 *lokānām locneṣu lepamayya iva aśrutayaḥ, jalpaneṣu śvasitani, hṛdayeṣu nikhātānīva duḥkhani abhavan/ ibid, p. 19*
- 20 *na kenāpi prāgjyotiṣapure asnayi, na kenapi abhoji, dūraṃ gatāni prasādhanāni vanitāvadanāt, vyalīyata hāvaḥ, bhāvaśca tirihitastddine/ ibid*
- 21 *rājnā prathamam rājyaṃ rakṣaṇīyaṃ/ nātra hṛdayavṛtteḥ prakāśāvasarah/ ibid, p. 102*
- 22 *Vide IV.12*
- 23 *manasā vṛtāpi sā amātyaiḥ nartakīti nānumanyate iti prakṛtikṣobhamāśaṅkya kumāreṇa nābhiṣiktāsāpaṭtamahisitve/ nunam madhavigataprana devapada nanyam tatsathanabhisiktamicchanti/ atavea*

mahārājādhirājo bhāskaravarmadevapāda idānīmapi 'kumārah' iti prasiddhah/ Avināśi, p. 110

²⁴ *ibid*, p. 14

²⁵ *ibid*, p. 13

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