

Narrating Christianity in Indian Languages, Arts and Cultures with Special Reference to Sanskrit Text and Context

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Sanskrit Bhāgīrathi through her centuries old journey on earth has been nourished by several scholars belonging to several nationalities, cultures, religions, philosophies and technical capabilities. This includes the contributions of the Hindu, Buddhist, Jain, Islamic and Christian luminaries. The studies by non-Indians especially by the European, American, Russian, Japanese scholars on Sanskrit and Sanskrit related technical literature are also to be noted. This paper makes an attempt to have a glance at those Christian themes which have been written through the medium of Sanskrit. The Christian scholars are a boon to Indian languages and Indological studies. Through their works the growth and preservation of many Indian languages and literary works and the spread of Christian ideas and themes had reciprocal effects. They studied new languages, wrote books, standardised scripts, evolved new methods of study, boosted printing, lexicographical and interlingual studies. The special areas were dictionaries, grammars, reference and source books, Vedic studies, middle Indic studies, modern languages, epic studies, Purāṇas, Buddhist and Jain studies, Indian theatre, poetry and metrics, Indian philosophy, lexicography, science and medicine, dharmaśāstra and arthaśāstra, epigraphy, history, art, archaeology, music etc. This paper makes an attempt to have a glance at those Christian themes which have been written through the medium of Sanskrit, mainly by the Indians.

The Christian scholars in the modern period specially took to the study of Sanskrit, wrote its grammars, reference books, lexicons, compiled its dictionaries and prepared its text books etc. With all

these equipments they took to the translation of the Bible into Sanskrit, the Old and the New Testaments, the Sermon on the Mount, and so on. They also composed many an original work in Sanskrit, in verse and prose, on Lord Christ. The result: A whole class of Christian literature in Sanskrit grew over a period of time especially in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. It would be worth its while to have a close look at it.

The activity in the field of the translation of the Bible into Sanskrit began as early as 1808. 'The New Testament of Our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ' was translated into Sanskrit from the original Greek by the missionaries at Serampore under the superintendence of William Carey in three volumes, the third volume making its appearance in 1811, three years after the publication of the first. This was followed by the Sanskrit translation of the Old and the New Testaments, again from Serampore in 1821. In 1845 the Baptist Mission Press, Calcutta published the book of the Prophet Isaiah in Sanskrit. In 1860 appeared the Bible for the Pandits with the first three chapters of Genesis diffusively and unreservedly commented in Sanskrit and English by J.R. Ballantyne from London. The translations started in the nineteenth century continued in the twentieth century as well. *The Bible Society of India brought out the latest reprint of the New Testament in Sanskrit: Prabhuṇa Yīśukhrisṭena Nirūpitasya Niyamasya Granthasaṁgrahah* as late as in 1962. Attempts were made alongside translating the Old and the New Testaments, certain portions thereof. The Calcutta Baptist Missionaries brought out from Calcutta in 1843 the translation from Hebrew into Sanskrit of the Book of Genesis and the part of Exodus. Two collections of the Proverbs of Solomon in Sanskrit appeared from the School Book Society's Press, Calcutta and The Baptist Mission Press, Calcutta in 1842 and 1846 respectively.

The Baptist Mission Press in Calcutta has been very active in bringing out Christian literature in Sanskrit translation. It brought out the collection of the Gospels of four Christian evangelists in a single volume: *Khrīsta caritam: Arthato Mathi-Mārka-Lūka-Yohanair Viracitam Susamvādah caustayam* in 1878. It also brought out separate volumes on the Gospels of Mathi, Mark and Luke. The one on Mathi under the title *Mathilikhitah Susamvādah* appeared in 1877 and the ones on Mark under the title *Markalikhitah Susamvādah* and *Satyadharmasāstram: Markalikhitah Susamvādah Arthato Prabhor Yīśukhrīṣṭīya-caritra-darpaṇam* appeared in 1878 and 1884 respectively. The Gospel of Luke came out under the title *Lūkalikhitah Susamvādah* in 1878. The Gospel of St. John

came out in Sanskrit under the title: *Yohana-likhitah Susamvādah* not from the Baptist Mission Press, Calcutta but from the Basel Mission Press, Mangalore in 1876.

Of the portions of the Bible, it is the Sermon on the Mount that has attracted good notice of the Sanskritists. There are at least three independent translations of it into Sanskrit by Lachmi dhar Shastri published by him from Delhi in 1928—first and second from the Bible Society of India, Bangalore, by K.P. Urumese from Trichur, the last two published in 1974. The sermon also appears in a succinct form in every creative work on Christ in Sanskrit. A very interesting work in the field of translation is the *khristayajna vidhih*. The work is a translation in Sanskrit of the *ordo Missae* in Latin by Ambrose Sureschandra Roy and was published from Calcutta in 1926. Apart from translations there has been a lot of original composition on Christianity in Sanskrit both in the nineteenth and the twentieth centuries. About half a dozen smaller works like the *isvaroktaśāstradhāra* (The course of Divine Revelation) by John Muir, the *Parama-stava*, a hymn in verse on God, Paulacarita, a short life of apostle Paul in verse, the *khristasangita*, the history of Jesus Christ in verse, the same *Khṛstadharmakaumudi* by J.R. Ballantyne, which is a comparison of Christianity with Hindu philosophy, in prose and a critical review of *Khṛstadharmakaumudisamalocana* in prose again by Brajalal Mukhopadhyaya.

The twentieth century too has seen many an original publications on Christ and Christianity, the latest and the biggest of which is the *Kristubhāgavatam*, a Mahākāvya in Sanskrit in thirty three cantos with a thousand and six hundred stanzas on the life of Lord Christ by P.C. Devassia which won him the coveted Sahitya Akademi award in Sanskrit in 1980. The thirty three cantos of the *kāvya* correspond to the number of the years of the Lord's life. Although in narrating the story of the Lord the author relies on the versions of the Gospels and some reputed biographies of Christ and is faithful to incidents as recorded there, yet he shows his freedom and imagination as a poet to introduce poetic elements which however do not dilute the authenticity of the narrative. The poem is simple and straightforward, composed in the much-valued *vaidarbhi* style (*vaidarbhi*, *gacidi* and *pancali* are the famous styles of Sanskrit).

The Mahākāvya, the greatest so far, on Lord Christ in Sanskrit has, as the author himself points out in the preface, many allusions to and illustrations from the Hindu Purānas and epics. This, the author

ascribes to his growth in an atmosphere of Sanskrit literature which could not but appear even in a work on Christ. Another great influence on the author in this was His Eminence Joseph Cardinal Parecattil, the Archbishop of Ernakulam who, he says, believes that the Church in India must have its roots in the culture and the tradition of the land. A Sanskrit scholar, he has played an important role in the Indianisation of the Church.

The stanzas in the Mahakavya have a flow of their own which cannot but charm a reader. A stanza or two from canto XVII dealing with the Sermon on the Mount could well be reproduced here by way of specimen:

*bhikṣā tvayā dakṣiṇahastadattā
na jñāyataṁ vāmakareṇa te sā.
dānasya caivam nibhṛtam kṛtasya
pitā phalam dāsyati guptadarśi.¹*

'When you give alms, do not let the left hand know what your right hand has done. For the alms giving thus done in secret, your Father who sees in secret shall reward you.'

*yūyam mā sañcinuta nidhim ātmārtham urvyām hi yasmāt
kītādyās tam kṣayam upanayanty atra muṣṇanti cauraḥ
svarge tān sañcinuta vibhavān ye hi tair na hṛiyante
vittam yasmin bhavati bhuvane tatra cittam ca vaḥ syāt²*

'Do not lay up for yourself treasures on earth, where moths and other insects consume them, and where thieves break in and steal them; but lay up those treasures in heaven where they are not consumed by them, for, where your treasure is, in that world will your heart also be.'

Of the smaller *kāvya*s on Lord Christ could be mentioned *Sree Yesusourabham* by Soma Varma Raja which has 67, 70, 78, and 86 stanzas in its first, second, third and fourth cantos respectively. The *kāvya* closes with five hymns of which the first is a prayer, a string of seven stanzas called the *Bhajanasaptakam*; the second, a hymn to the Sacred Heart; the third, the praise of Christ; the fourth, the hymn to Christ; and the fifth, the *Bhaktajjivisa*, an expression of the desire of the devotee to see the Master and to live according to his tenets. In its 301 stanzas in mellifluous Sanskrit, the author sums up the whole story of the Bible. Though following the Biblical narrative faithfully, he takes reasonable licence in versification. The reactions of the multitude gathered at the foot of the Cross, Christ's enemies,

his devotees, the sorrowful women and the good men and their addresses to the crucified are all presented in the present work with deftness. Both the genius and the originality of the author are reflected in this part and the words of the spectators on Calvary sink deep into the heart:

*Krūṣa paramaviśālo py ugrarūpam tvadīyam
manasi kalayatofbhīh pāpinah kasya na syāt
tvam asi kathinapīdābhogaparyāyavāci
nikhilajananiṣevyo divyasaṅgena jātaḥ.*³

‘... wide cross! Who will not be frightened to see or think about you. You have become another word for grave pain. But now you are a thing of worship, for you have carried our Lord on you.’

In the lamentation of Mary, the Mother of Lord Christ, a note of intense sorrow is struck. The words therein betray in full the motherly pangs. It seems that while writing about this the poet had in his mind the description of the lamentation of Rati in the *Kumarasambhava* and that of Aja in the *Raghuvamśa* of Kālidāsa. Not only is the whole setting the same, but the metre too:

*gatasamjñam avekṣya vihvalā
Mariyā svāṅkagatam nijātmajam.
vilalāpa sabāṣpalocanā
samaduḥkhān akhilāṅśca kurvātī.*⁴

‘Mary saw the lifeless body of her son on her lap. She was overcome with grief. She cried shedding tears, making all present there equally sorry.’

The expression ‘vilalapa sabasपालocana’ cannot but remind one of the *Raghuvamśa*’s ‘vilalapa sabasपालogadam’⁵ and ‘samaduḥkhan akhilans ca kurvati’ of the *Kumarasambhava*’s ‘vilalapa vikirnamurdhaja samaduḥkham iva kurvati sthalim’. So do the lines ‘krpano mama dairghyam ayusah kathinah khalviha dattavan vidhih’⁶ of *Kumarasambhava*’s ‘na vidiryē kathinah khalu striyah’.⁷

Kalidasa’s influence on the author is also noticeable in the stanza in the beginning of his work:

*kva me nirviṣayā buddhih
kva śriyeśumahākathā.
mohād bhavāmyārurukṣur
āmayāvi mahāgirim.*⁸

‘Where is the intellect devoid of the knowledge of the subject matter

and where is the great magnificent story of Jesus. It is an attempt, like that of a sick man trying to climb a high mountain.'

This is clearly inspired by the well-known *Raghuvamsa* verse:

kva sūryaprabhavo vaṁśah
kva calpaviṣaya matih.
titīrṣur dustaram mohād
uḍupenāsmi sāgaram.⁹

'Where is the race sprung from the sun and where is my intellect of limited scope. It is under a delusion that I am desirous of crossing, by means of a raft, the ocean so difficult to cross.'

A spirit of the divine and a sense of devotion pervade the whole of the Sreeyesusourabham which is indeed a happy blend of simplicity and profundity. It reflects the glorious and the heavenly personality of Lord Christ in a most impressive manner and amply reveals the poet in the author whose Khandakavya it is to this category that his work belongs according to rhetoricians—makes a very pleasant reading. There are similes, metaphors and fancies here which do tickle the Sahrdaya, the connoisseur and add further charm to the work.

The author is in the habit of twisting some of the foreign words to give them a different look, not necessarily Sanskritic, to make them fit into Sanskrit diction. Abraham, he puts as Abraha, David as Davida, Gabriel as Gabriyet, Elizabeth as Yelisva, Mary as both Meri and Mariya, Augustus Caesar as Agastasisara, Christ as Iṣo and Yesu, Herod as Heroda, Judea as Yudaya, Messiah as both Mihisa and Misiha, Nazareth as Nasratama, Jerusalem as Jasrela, Magdelene as Magdalana and so on.

Only those writers can compose works in Sanskrit who have thorough knowledge of its literature. The writers of the works on Christ and Christianity, even though devout Christians, inheriting or adopting the Sanskrit tradition as they did, could not keep themselves away from it even while dealing with them not part and parcel of it. By sheer habit sometimes they would use old words to denote new ideas. The use of the word 'vaidika' in the poem under reference in the sense of a Christian priest is a case in point. An extension of this word is 'Vaidikasrama' in the sense of a Christian Seminary:

Vaṭavātūradeśiya-
vaidikāśramacoditaḥ.
karomi nūtanākhyānam
yesūsaurabhasaṁjñitam.¹⁰

'Impelled by the friends in the Vatavathur Seminary I compose this Kavya, the Sreeyesourabham.'

It was again the force of the Sanskrit tradition that weighed with the present author to start his *kāvya* on the life of Lord Christ with an invocation to goddess Sarasvati:

*yā tu sangītasāhityakalācaitanyarūpinī
satām ādhārabhūtām tām vande vidyādhidevetām.*¹¹

'I salute the goddess of learning who wields the authority over music, literature and art. She is the support of all good-natured people and poets.'

It is the influence of Sanskrit tradition again that makes the author refer to the celestial Ganges in the context of Holy Mary carrying Lord Christ:

*talpam gavadanibhadram citpumso garbhadhāriṇī
sā dhyuvāsānjasā Merī hamsīvābhranādītaṁ.*¹²

'Mary who was carrying the son of God in her womb was lying in the manger as the swan lies in the celestial Ganges.'

The description in the work of the regions becoming bright and gentle breeze blowing at the birth of Christ is a piece with similar descriptions which have become a type now in Sanskrit literature:

*praseduḥ kṣanam evāsā marutaśca sukhā vāvuh
bahuvur nirmalas capah kupesvapi sarahsvapi.*¹³

Like the other poems on Christ's life, this poem too has the Sermon on the Mount in brief.

Another smaller original work in Sanskrit prose on the life of Lord Christ is the Yesucaritam by J. Marcel who styles himself as Marsalacarya. The work he divides in five Adhyayas, in beautiful, chaste Sanskrit which has a classical ring about it. The entire life of the Lord is put here succinctly in an easy and fluent style. Two small paragraphs from this will be sufficient to form an idea of its Sanskrit:

*sa yadā svasmai dattam Yiśayasya pustakam udaghāṭayat tadā tatredam
likhitam avartata. Īśvaro mayyavasthitaḥ..... viśādāvidīrṇāntaraṅgān
sukhayitum baddhānām muktim andhānām darsśnam ca pradātum..... mām
prajighāya saḥ.*¹⁴

'When he opened the book of Yiśāya given to him he found it written there. The Lord is in me. He has sent me to provide happiness to the sad and to give release to the bound and sight to the blind.'

*Paran tu bho śrotārah yuṣmān idam vaktum abhyutsahe ye yuṣmabhyam
druhyanti teṣām api hitam eva tanuta. yuṣmān śapanti ye tebhyopy āśīsam
eva datta. ye yuṣmān apavadanti teṣām api hitam prarthayadhvam. yas
tava ekasmin kapole praharati tasmai kapalam anyam api pradārśaya....yo
va ko va bhavatu tāvako yācakaḥ, dehi tasmai. mā abhivāñcha
tatpratyādānam. kiñ ca yuṣmān prati yādṛśam ācāram abhilasatha, tādṛśo
bhavatu yuṣmākam api itareṣvācārah....¹⁵*

‘But O you the listeners, I feel like telling—Even those who are hostile to you, you do good to them too. Those who curse you, them too you bless. Those who denounce you, you pray for their welfare too. To the one who slaps you on one cheek, you show him the other one. Whosoever may ask you for something, give that to him. Don’t care for any return for it. Moreover, the kind of treatment you want for yourself, meet the same to others.’

The next work which is not an original composition in Sanskrit but very much looks like so is the *Māhatyāgi* of M.O. Avara. The work was originally composed in Malayalam but was translated from it into Sanskrit by K.P. Narayana Pisharoty. The work in verse meaning literally the Man of Sacrifice is a poetic reflection on the seven last words uttered by Jesus Christ from the Cross. The Malayalam original had attained great popularity and had for some three decades been the text book for examinations in the Universities of Madras, Travancore and Kerala. It was its success that had prompted the author to arrange for its Sanskrit translation. ‘He wanted to see the story of Christ portrayed in the great classical language of India.’

The *Māhatyāgi* is a fine work of poetry in 163 stanzas. The thought in it is so serene, the language so imaginative and the versification so meticulously correct. The environments of the crucifixion of Christ have been so poetically treated here that those who read the work cannot but have their eyes moistened. The lines which portray the effect of the words ‘Forgive them, O Father, because they know not what they do’ are the best in this work of which the following four lines bear reproduction:

*kāruṇyārdramate kṣamasva bho
aparādham kṛtam ebhir īdṛśam.
yad ime na vidhuh svakarma vā
na ca vā tvatkaruṇām api prabho.¹⁶*

The work being a *kāvya*, a poem, it affords the author ample scope for the flight of his imagination. The arms of Christ stretched on the Cross, the poet takes as indicative of the readiness on the part of

Christ to embrace or as wings to soar aloft to carry all miseries of mankind on his shoulders:

*nijapārśvayuge bhujadvayam
śubhadāyī pravisārayan bhavān.
krūśadāruṇi kim nu vartate
jagadāśleṣanabaddhakautukaḥ.
athavā naralokagām vyathām
akhilām skandhatale tvam udvahan.
pravitatya patatrayor dvayam
dharāṇīto ḍayitum kim udyataḥ?*¹⁷

The Sanskrit expression in the poem has a classical ring about it

*Mihiraḥ kiraṇair nijaiḥ śubhair
jagadandhatvam apākarotyasa.
dyutim asya mahātmanah katham
punarīkṣeta divāndhakauśikaḥ.*¹⁸

While the sun with its powerful rays takes away the blindness of the earth, how can owl which cannot see during daytime see the greatness of the Great Light?

Like the poet of the Sreeyesusaurabham the poet of the *Mahātyāgi* too Sanskritises many foreign words by just twisting them. The classic example of this is the word *krusa* which can be formed from the Sanskrit root *krus*, to cry, for the English cross. The same he does with the words *paradise* which he puts in Sanskrit as *parudisa* and *pelican* which he puts in Sanskrit as *palikka*. The idea of the Lord he expresses by the words *Iṣa*, *Isita*, *Iśvara* and so on. The influence of classical Sanskrit *kāvya*s is so penetratng on him that he adopts a non-Sanskrit word 'ingala' for 'charcoal' used in one of them, the *Naisadhiyacarita* of Sri Harṣa.

Since the approach of the Christian scholars in India, as pointed out at the very outset of the present discussion, was to confront the non-Christian local people, particularly the educated ones among them through their own medium, the medium for which they had special adoration, to enter into them, to bring them round to their view, they took to composing such works as approximated to the old Hindu Sanskrit works in nomenclature and style. Such works are the *Kristayana*, the *Girigita* and the *Kristunamasahasram* modelled as they are, as can be seen from their names on the *Ramayana*, the *Bhagavadgita* and the *Visnu Sahasranama* respectively. There is reported to be a *Kristopanisd* also composed in the typical Upanisadic style.

It should be clear from what has been said above that there has grown in Sanskrit a considerable corpus of Christian literature both in original and in translation. Christianity reached India in the early centuries of Christianity itself. But their Sanskrit studies and Sanskrit related works were more manifest during the modern period when the Europeans came to India especially in the eighteenth, nineteenth and twentieth centuries. When the European, Christian scholars came to India, they found Sanskrit still the medium of higher thought and culture to some extent. The intelligentsia comprised the elite, upper caste people and brahmin pandits. The Christian scholars of the time thought that if they were to make any impact on Indian society, they had to learn the language of the palace people, the language of the higher castes and render their writings in it to be accessible to them. The language Sanskrit was considered to be the ecclesiastical medium, the *amarabhasa*, the *devavani* of Hindu religion. It might be one of the reasons for their usage of classical imageries, idioms, and allegories as it were in the pristine classical and vedic sources. Once the upper castes—who had the upper hand in society—were drawn to Christianity, it would be easier for them, to spread the message of Christ among the common people who would feel attracted towards it as the earlier dictum goes 'yathā rāja tathā prajā' (as the ruler so the people or the people follow the king). The literature, though composed primarily to reach the Sanskrit-knowing intelligentsia to motivate it to Christianity, has a lot to commend itself even as work of art and consequently deserves wide notice not only in India but also beyond its shores. Hence the vast area of Sanskrit literature is voluminous. The contribution made by the Christians and Christian themes towards the nourishment of Sanskrit literature, especially the categories and characteristics of Christian Sanskrit literature and their comparison with Hindu, Buddhist and Jain Sanskrit works etc. are the areas to be studied in the new third millennium.

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| 3. IV: 48. | 4. IV: 52 |
| 5. VIII: 43 | 6. IV: 4 |
| 7. IV: 5 | 8. 1: 2. |
| 9. 1: 2. | 10. Preliminary verses, verse 12. |
| 11. <i>Ibid.</i> , verse 1. | 12. II: 38. |

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