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A. K. Ramanujan on Bhakti and Modern Poetry

Abstract

Ramanujan's essays on *Bhakti* and Modern poetry closely examine the rich tradition of *Bhakti* poetry in India and its impact on modern poetry. He goes through the lives of the saints and links their lives to their works. He explores the various trends and distinguishes the lives of women saints from those of male saints. This depth of the understanding of the works of south Indian saints is remarkable. Comparing Indian devotional poets to the western ones, he reaches the conclusion that Indian Bhakti poetry is richer in many ways than the western.



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Introduction

A.K. Ramanujan has written valuable essays on literature, culture, Bhakti, modern poetry and folklore which appeared in The Collected Essays of A.K. Ramanujan edited by Vinay Dharwadker and published by the Oxford University Press. One of the four sections of the book is devoted to Bhakti and Modern poetry. In these essays Ramanujan appears as an incisive critic probing deep into this vast ocean of poetry. In India there has been a glorious tradition of illustrious saints and seers, who illumined the period they lived in and endeavoured to educate and elevate the people through their lives and teachings. In the course of their travels and pilgrimages to temples and holy places, they met people – peasants and princes alike – discussed with them and tried to chasten them. Their devotional poetry not only inspired the masses but also showed them the path to the supreme good. Each one of them was a strong link in the long chain of the Bhakti tradition. Various part of India had their own saints and seers at different periods. Maharashtra had the honour of having several saints like Jnaneshwar, Namdev, Chokha Mela, Eknath, Tukaram and Ramadasa. With absolute faith in God, they lived among the people and gave them message of love, equality and brotherhood through their teachings and kirtanas. They endeavored to eliminate ignorance, religious and caste arrogance, and usher in amity, tolerance and mutual understanding among all people in society. Among these towering figures saint Chokha Mela occupies a pride of place.

North Indian and South Indian Bhakti Traditions:

In North India Kabir, Mirabai, Surdas and Tulsidas are the towering saints whose work has illumined and sustained this part of the nation during dark times. Their influence has gone beyond this region, even to the far flung countries of the world. In South India, there has been an equally strong tradition of saints and devotional poetry. A. Padmanaban aptly remarks about the relevance of all these saints and their poetry in the introduction to Story of Eight Saint Reformers:

The messages and deeper thoughts of these saints are as much relevant today as they were several centuries ago. Their doctrine of social equality, self dependence and oneness will guide us in overcoming the major challenges facing the country today.¹

Bhakti is an integral part of the Indian life and Bhakti poetry is an indispensable portion of the Indian literature. Devotional poetry is deeply ingrained in the Indian psyche and its relevance is all pervasive and everlasting. Gur Charan Das quotes Ramanujan's view with which he himself agrees:

A.K. Ramanujan used to say, In India... no one ever reads the Ramayan or the Mahabharat for the first time. The stories are there, "alwaysready." He meant by this, I think, that every generation adopts and reinterprets the Indian epics to reflect the concerns of its time. (Difficulty)²

Ramanujan's Critical Approach:

Ramanujan, the critic finds Bhakti poetry a fit area for critical research of the four sections of The collected Essays.

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One is devoted to the study of Bhakti poetry. Ramanujan remained a student and a researcher throughout his life. He never wrote cartloads of stuff but whenever he set out for writing there was always the promise of a new discovery. H.Y. Sharada Prasad accesses his critical ability in these words:

He remained a student even when he was such a formidable scholar. The total volume of his output was not too large. He didn't write cartloads of stuff, recondite and unreadable. There was always the promise that he would come up with something new of impeccable quality. (Tribute)³

The introduction to this section is written by John B. Carman. In this he examines the major strands in Ramanujan's criticism of Bhakti and Modern poetry. Ramanujan studies the various shades of Bhakti poetry and finally accesses them in the wider context of the Indian devotional poetry.

The first is the sharp 'cutting edge' of Bhakti, studied primarily in the Kannada free-verse 'Utterances' of the Virasaiva saints. The second is the yearning for and celebration of the ultimate connection with God, studied most intensively in the Tamil Vaisnava hymns of Nammalvar. The third is the development of a typology of Bhakti saints as they are presented in a wide range of stories in many languages. (Essays 263)⁴

Women Saints:

The first essays of the section is "On Women Saints". Ramanujan studies the various categories of saints and finds that women saints have received less attention although their work is as rich as that of male saints. Ramanujan's approach to the study of these saints is western and scientific. The most important thing noticeable about women saints is that they defy the ideals of the Indian womanhood. They are not like Sita and Savitri. They are not married to earthly man. God is their first love. They do not surrender to bonds of marriage. They assume an unmarriageable form either by adopting the role of a man or an aged woman. They dedicate themselves wholly to God and are ready to embrace shame on earth. They do not care for fame or shame. Their ultimate goal is union with God :

The woman saint, however, is not typically bound to a man instead she is dedicated at an early age to God, God is her first love, unlike upper caste male saints, therefore, she need undergo no conversion. She defies her parents, escaping marriage in one of several ways. (274)⁵

"Men, Women, and Saints" is another valuable critical essay. In this Ramanujan focuses on the South Indian saints including the women and the untouchable saints. He studies their behaviour patterns and spiritual achievements. He describes the salient categories of these saints in following words :

There is no single word, like English word 'Saint', in Indian languages for this kind of person, but one can find different words depending on the religious group : the Kannada Virsaivas call them Sarana, the Kannada Vaisnavas dasa, the Tamil Saivities nayanmar, the Tamil Vaisnavas alvar. (279)⁶

The Family of Saints:

Taken together these saints form a family and they are addressed as anna or the elder brother and akka or the elder sister. They form their genealogy in which even the ancient saints are included. They live in the house of experience. The description of their lives are recorded in books which are later considered as sacred. Their poetry forms a body of literature which is noteworthy for its devotional and literary qualities :

They are often thought of as a family, as a society. They make a genealogy for themselves which includes earlier saints, making and dwelling in a House of Experience....Their lives are later written together,...". (282)⁷

A.K. Ramanujan shows a unique insight into the lives and works of the South Indian saints. Even during his banishment he did not lose his touch with his motherland. His taste for Kannada and Tamil literature continued and he kept on studying the cardinal literary works in these two languages .His study was always a kind of research which yielded rare findings. He was a man of keen interest who questioned everything including his own self. The reputed poet K.N. Daruwalla says that Ramanujan made the best use of exile :

He got all the magazines from South India that he wanted. He never felt cut off from home. From a personal preoccupation, his interest in the two languages, grew into a professional concern. He emphasized "the double resource to be in two cultures", but pointed out the tensions of living in such a state as well, that led to constant "self-questioning". (Expatriate 18-19)⁸

"The Myths of Bhakti : Images of Siva in Saiva Poetry" contains Ramanujan's study of Virsaiva poetry. In it he studies the difference between the iconic and the aniconic Bhakti traditions. The distinction between Sagun and Nirgun Bhakti is regarded to be a great source of creativity. The essay focuses on the use of images in Virsaiva poetry. Carman remarks :

In 'The Myths of Bhakti', Ramanujan discusses Virasaiva poetry's subliminal use of mythic images' and illustrates ' the intimate, innovative images of Siva in the lives of the saints'. Right at the start he recognises the distinction between iconic and aniconic devotion as a useful one. (267)⁹

An Allama Poem:

In his another essay "Why an Allama Poem Is Not a Riddle : An Anthological Essay" Ramanujan mentions Allama Prabhu as the most radical Virsaiva saint. His poems are like riddles which defy structure. Allama's devotion is above common rules. He rejects grammar and other linguistic laws which control and tame language. In his view devotion is superior to language. It is his devotion only which gives symmetry to his poems. Otherwise they are like riddles which puzzle the common man. Carman maintains :

'Why an Allama Poem Is Not a Riddle' parallels the Introduction to Speaking of Siva : the anti-structural message in Virsaiva Bhakti is here exemplified in the words of its most radical

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representative, Allama Prabhu. His 'obscure riddle like questioning poems' are unique among Virsaiva poets. (Essays 267)¹⁰

In 'Varieties of Bhakti' Ramanujan studies the various kinds of Bhakti poetry and compares them with the western devotional poetry. He finds that each poem is a class by itself and is not comparable to any other poem. It is their content that makes them comparable. Translation also makes this comparison possible. All Bhakti poetry is marked by its suggestive quality. The variety of Bhakti poetry in India is unique of its kind.

Bharati as a Poet:

In "On Bharati and His Prose Poem" Ramanujan describes Subramania Bharati as a devotional poet of extraordinary merit. His greatness lies in the fact that he makes the past useful and relevant. His poetry marks a rare combination of the qualities of Tamil, and the Western poetry. He combines in himself the merits of various devotional poets and his prose poems which are often in the form of aphorisms constitute his rare achievements. Ramanujan writes;

Subramania Bharati was one such poet for Tamil. To respond to his work is to respond to a great deal of Tamil, Indian and Western Literature. In his work, one finds poems written in the manner of various devotional poets as well as the later Cittars who were fierce iconoclastic mystics. (332)¹¹

Conclusion:

Ramanujan's essays are readable and enjoyable for all. They always have the palpable touch of humour and wit. His incisive wisdom makes them equally useful for researchers and scholars. He makes the best use of the past in them without losing sight of the ever changing moral and ethical dimensions. These essays train the reader in the appreciation of poetry. Ramanujan's study of Bhakti poetry can be seen in wider perspective of his return to his roots. On his return, he could see things with sharper eyes. U.R. Anantha Murthy opines in this connection.

Colonial history has many instances of people coming back to their roots after having gone far away offering invaluable insights. Ramanujan is a curious phenomenon among such people. (Connoisseur 10)¹²

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