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Itihāsottama: A Source Text Of Cultural Amalgamation

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ABSTRACT

Culture refers to way of life. The food people eat, drink, wear or speak, even the God which is worshiped, all are aspects of Culture. In short, the way people think and does, is called Culture. The life of Indians was documented in Sanskrit Literature. Even from the historical perspective many unpublished manuscripts are still relevant today to study the past. The complete vision of society's cultural and traditional resources is possible only through critical edition of a particular text. In this paper a particular unpublished text named '*Itihāsottama*' seems by the name anyhow related to *Itihāsa* or *Purāṇa*. But the most unique feature of the *text* is the orientation of *Bhakti*. Some of the ideas are still followed by the devotees of *Vaiṣṇavism* to preserve their cultural heritage. Even the other diverse dogmas and belief systems are propounded. References can be traced in the format of stories. Dealing with diverse topics, it is considered a source-book of various cultural traditions of the ancient Indian society. Which is done by the present author as her M.Phil Dissertation. Based on that the study of the cultural part from the text '*Itihāsottama*' to discuss the religious idea of that particular society. This paper attempts to discuss and analyse *Bhakti* and other beliefs as described in the text.

1.0 Introduction

The term *Itihāsa*, means '*historical event*' or *past event*. The *Mahābhārata* is the best specimen of that which declares, '*this is the best of the Itihāsas*'. Here a particular unpublished text named '*Itihāsottama*' belongs to the classical Indian narrative tradition. The text seems by the name anyhow related to *Itihāsa* or *Purāṇa*. The philosophy of the content of the present text has proved the present writer wrong. It is a poetry composition in 25 chapters. The author

of *Itihāṣottama* is anonymous. Identifying the place of origin of text is also difficult. It is more difficult and virtually impossible to pass any judgement on the date of the text, due to the lack of any conclusive evidence or clue. In spite of that, the approx date would be before 11th century because *Itihāṣottama* was mentioned in *Nāmamālikā* (15th century) of Bhoja¹, & *Haribhakti Vilāsa* (16th century) of Sri Gopala Bhatta. The unique feature of the *Itihāṣottama* is that, it always resorts to examples while elucidating any concept or idea for the sake of educating the common mass specially women and sūdra. The text says Kṛṣṇa is the supreme Godhead. Here *Bhakti* and other diverse dogmas and popular belief systems has propounded through stories, myths, narratives. There are *Ākhyānas* from *Mahābhārata*, *Puṛāṇa* also etc. This text is a result of the *Pāñcarātra* and the Bhāgavata cults of *Vaiṣṇavism* around 8th century CE. *Bhakti mārga* enables human beings to devote their entire being in an unselfish and unconditional way to God. *Itihāṣottama* deals with diverse topics so it is considered not only a selection of stories but also a kind of a source-book of social history which throws light on Indian philosophy, culture, ethics and Bhakti tradition etc.

2.0 Research Question

The Main research question of this paper is that how the *Itihāṣottama* has become the source of cultural amalgamations? It is really not possible to analyse culture as mentioned in the *Itihāṣottama* in a short paper. Instead, this paper is an attempt to discuss some aspects of *cultural amalgamation* as described in the text. Specially *Itihāṣottama is compilations of stories from itihāsa and purana* But it shows its familiarity with the tenets of Bhakti and the dogmas of Vaiṣṇava sect.

3.0 Research Methods

1. collecting data from five chapters of critical edited text *Itihāṣottama*².
2. comparative study of the discussed topic from all the variant of the Manuscript.
3. descriptive analysis of the chapters

Although overall cultural study is not largely explained in this paper but The methodology section includes data collections from five chapters of five different Manuscripts described by *New Catalogus Catalogorum* which is an extension of Aufrecht's *Catalogus Catalogorum*. Five were used here for M.phil. research. Name of the Manuscripts were given on the first letter of the script has used in the MSS.(e.g. D>Devnagari & M>Malayalam)

The details of manuscript are as follows³:

Ms D1, Repository: Adyar, Devanāgarī script, Good and well-conserved, complete.

1 Shastri, Haraprasad. (1934). *A Descriptive Catalogue at Sanskrit Manuscripts in the Govt. Collection under the care of the Royal Asiatic Society of Bengal*. vol vii, Kavya. p. 564.

2 "Critical edition of *Itihāṣottama*" was the topic of M.Phil dissertation of present author of the paper. It is restricted up to first five chapters of the text. Present author would aim at enlarging the ambit of the research and acquire more insights into the text over time.

<http://www.sanskrit-lexicon.unikoeln.de/scans/ACCScan/2013/web/webtc/download.html> [last accessed 22.1.2022]

Ms D2, Repository: Mysore Oriental Research Institute, Devanagari script, not look very old, good in condition, not complete, colophon absent.

Ms D3, Repository: IGNC, Devanāgarī, micro film style

Ms M1-Repository: Kerala, Kariavattom, old Malayalam script, worm-eaten, complete, Scribe: Narayanan Mitran, Nambooripad

Ms M2, Repository: Kerala University Kariavattom, old Malayalam, worm-eaten, incomplete¹.

4.0 Data Collection

Because the author is anonymous so identifying the place of origin of a text is difficult. The same applies to *Itihāsottama*. The maximum number of Manuscripts are towards a South Indian origin. The text refers often to places of north India, e.g., Indraprastha, Kurukhetra etc., and, on the whole, has a pan-Indian character, in harmony with almost all our canonical texts. It is most unfortunate that the identity of the author of the text could not be determined. If any argument with respect to the place of origin of *Itihāsottama* is entirely based on conjecture and speculation, then it is all the more difficult and virtually impossible to pass any judgement on the date of the text, due to the lack of any conclusive evidence or clue. Approximately the date would be before 11th century because this text was mentioned in *Nāmamālikā* (11th century) & *Haribhakti Vilāsa* (16th century). Not a single commentary has been discovered yet.

5.0 Data Analysis, Result and Discussion

i. The author compares *Itihāsōttama* with the eighteen *Purāṇas* as a substitute of themselves (*Aṣṭādaśapurāṇaṅkṣepa*)². First chapter starts with salutation to the Jagannātha or Nārāyaṇa, the all-pervading supreme being of the universe³.

ii. Second chapter named *Gautamaśiṣyasamvāda* throws light on the Indian wisdom and morality of relation between a Guru and his disciples. It is made clearer by a story of how *sumati kapila* and other *śiṣyas* after a lot of effort succeed high state by worshipping and serving their guru, sage *Gautama*. It also teaches how to attain supreme bliss through the practice of Bhakti⁴. The text upholds Kṛṣṇa's glory through its various narratives and eulogies because he is the supreme Godhead.

3 Name of the Manuscripts were given on the first letter of the script has used in the MSS. (D>Devnagari & M>Malayalam)

1 *New Catalogus Catalogorum* which is an extension of Aufrecht's *Catalogus Catalogorum* refers eleven manuscripts of this text. Five of them were used here for this research.

2 *aṣṭādaśapurāṇeṣu śruteṣu vidhipūrvakam*

yat phalaṁ jāyate puṁsāṁ tadasya śravaṇād bhavet ||Itihāsottama,1/5||

3 *praṇipatya jagannāthaṁ nārāyaṇamanāmayam |*

itihāsottamaṁ puṇyaṁ pravakṣyāmi yathātatham ||Itihāsottama,1/1||

4 *ādhītavedaśāstro'pi na kṛtādhvarakarmyapi |*

yo bhaktiṁ vahate viṣṇa tena sarvaṁ kṛtaṁ bhavet||Itihāsottama, 3/43||

iii. *Itihāsottama* encompasses both the narrative and the spiritual, paradigms yielded respectively by the *Mahābhārata*. Example of ideal disciples abound in the epic, the most famous of them being *āruṇi utanka* and *Arjuna*. These texts contain prescriptions and solutions for almost all problems in human life, across time and space.

iv. *Jñāna mārṅa* is difficult for the common man to pursue. It emphasises on the realisation of the Self as the nirguṇa Brahman, a concept hard to grasp. Therefore we find the rise of the Bhakti mārṅa which enables human beings to devote their entire being in an unselfish and unconditional way to God (in personal form), thereby relinquishing all desires, worries and worldly attachments. Though the Bhakti mārṅa is apparently different from the Jñāna mārṅa, there is no innate difference between the two at the end, because both lead to the same goal of niśreyasa. Knowledge means effort but Bhakti is effortless and spontaneous. While puruṣārthās are four (dharma, artha, kāma, mokṣa), Itihāsottama deals primarily with Bhakti¹. The story of Vikukṣi mentions how even a sinner(dog eater) is saved. We can relate this story with angulimāl (murderer) of Buddhist literature also. Here we notice a synthesis of the doctrines of Karma, Bhakti, Jñāna, Yoga etc. along with other diverse dogmas and popular belief systems. Bhakti mārṅa enables human beings to devote their entire being in an unselfish and unconditional way to God. Itihāsottama deals with diverse topics so it is considered not only a selection of stories but also a kind of a source-book of social history which throws light on Indian philosophy, culture, ethics and Bhakti tradition etc.

v. This text discusses a number of topics which are very popular in *Mahābhārata* and *Purāṇas*, through a master-disciple-dialogue (*guruśiṣyasambhāṣaṇam*) between the saint *Bhṛṅgu* and *Śaunaka*. It is an Upaniṣadic mode of teaching². *Itihāsottama* always resorts to examples while elucidating any concept or idea for the sake of educating the common mass. Such a method makes abstruse theories and moral precepts easy to understand and more pragmatic. The narratives in these works being rich, entertaining, practical, with a deep understanding of the world order, bearing a lofty thought, invariably cut deeply through our minds.

vi. In the chapter *Indraśākalasamvāda*, when Bhṛṅgu was asked by *Śaunaka* about *Dharma* he proclaims *Ahiṃsa* or non-violence as the best *Dharma* and he illustrates the thought through the story of a conversation between Indra and Śākala, a *brāhmaṇa* from Indraprastha. The *Itihāsottama* ordain ancient Intellectual ideas like *Ahiṃsā Dayā, Dāna, Tapa, Śama, Dama, Asteya*. All of which are reflected in the same ideas depicted in *Purāṇas*. This is propounded also by the early Āchāryas of the later period e.g. Rāmānuja, Vallabha Madhva etc. Here we notice a

1 *akiṛcanāśca munayo bhaktyārāddhya jagatpatim/*
yātā muktirṇ naraśreṣṭha dharmārthau ca tathā'pare||Itihāsottama, 3/41||
antaṁ gato'pi vedānāṁ sarvaśāstrārthavedyapi /
yo na sarveśvare bhaktastarṇ vidyāt puruṣādhamam||Itihāsottama, 3/42||
2 *evam kṛtvā guroḥ samyak śuśrūṣāṁ vidhivad gurum |*
tameva śaraṇaṁ gacchenmanovākkāyakarmabhiḥ ||Itihāsottama, 2/13||

synthesis of the doctrines of *Karma*, *Bhakti*, *Jñāna*, *Yoga* etc. along with other diverse dogmas and popular belief systems.

vii. Related to and contemporaneous with many *Purāṇas*, there was also a distinct body of Vaiṣṇava canonical texts, known as the *Pāñcarātras*. Taking much of their material from the Purāṇic Vaiṣṇava tradition, these texts glorify the primarily non-Vedic deity Nārāyaṇa, identified with Viṣṇu, and prescribe sectarian devotion and worship with respect to him. Although heretical in its initial stages, the *Pāñcarātra* system gradually assimilated the Vedic and quasi-Vedic doctrines, e.g., Sāṃkhya, Yoga, Vedānta etc, and therefore was found authentic by later authorities like Yāmuna and others. There was apparently no difficulty in identifying the *Pāñcarātra*-*Purāṇa* tenets as having had a Vedic origin. Historians are of the opinion that the *Pāñcarātra* and the Bhāgavata cults got amalgamated at a certain point of time, thereby announcing a syncretism between Nārāyaṇa, Viṣṇu and Vāsudeva-Kṛṣṇa. May be this amalgam was propelled by an impetus to checkmate the surge of heretical creeds like Buddhist-Jaina-Cārvākas. Knowledge means effort but Bhakti is effortless and spontaneous.

viii. It is clear from *Itihāsottama* that any sinner can be purified by the utterance (Nāmasaṃkīrtana) of the holy name Viṣṇu¹, which exists in practice in present time also. It is said that even a dog eater who struggles to do it cannot commit so many sins that they cannot be purified by the chanting the holy name of Viṣṇu. Haribhakti Vilasa used this as a source text. *Itihāsottama* says “*Śvādopi na hi śaknoti kartuṃ pāpāni yatnataḥ | tāvantī yāvatī śaktirviṣṇornāmośubhakṣaye*”. To spread the glory of the utterance of the holy name It gives stress on Nāmasaṃkīrtana which is mentioned in Haribhaktivilasa also. *Svapopi nāmasmṛtirādi puṃsaḥ kṣayaṃ karotyāhita pāparāśeḥ | prayatnataḥ kiṃ punarādi puṃsaḥ prakīrtite nāmni janārdanasya*

6.0 Conclusions:

The mode of narration in *Itihāsottama* is in harmony with the layered narrative pattern. This particular style enables the author to weave into the framework of a single narrative, multiple stories and legends. This is generally realized through the employment of dialogue. It serves diverse purposes, e.g. moral lessons, lessons on duties of a king, multiplicity of view points on a single issue, or merely preservation of historical tradition. Education should aim at overall character building and not merely on sharing information. The main purpose in these texts is not mere narration, but to bring people closer to the path of dharma through *Viṣṇu bhakti*. The verses and aphorisms of this bhakti oriented text is to stress on moral and social virtues like compassion, philanthropy, universal brotherhood, non-violence, truth and moral disciplines. This unpublished text is a synthesis between narration of events and moral lesson to build the character of human being. So, It is not fully history or *Purāṇa* or bhakti text. Literary text does not have only single purpose. Post structuralist like Jacques Derrida and Michel Foucault have

1 *Śvādopi na hi śaknoti kartuṃ pāpāni yatnataḥ | tāvantī yāvatī śaktirviṣṇornāmośubhakṣaye*”. Haribhakti vilāsa, 11/343

argued that truth is always relative therefore, there is no “one” authentic history. One’s truth become another’s myth or false. The ideal study of history should be a synthesis between the narration of events and moral lessons. The Indian canonical text like *Itihāṣottama* exactly served this purpose. Their approach is clearly midway between didactic and documentary, and no story narrated in this text which is without a moral purpose. The main purpose in these texts is not mere narration, but to bring people closer to the path of dharma through *Viṣṇu bhakti*. Even Ramakant Chakraborty stated “the bhakti verses and aphorisms stress the need of cultivating moral and social virtues like compassion, philanthropy, universal brotherhood regardless of friends and foes, non-violence, truth and moral discipline”.

7.0 Future research:

Even the existence of this text proves that undeniable primacy and priority of the *Rāmāyaṇa*, the *Mahābhārata*, the *Purāṇas* were not the end. Although the *Mahābhārata*, itself is called “*Itihāṣottama*”¹ and present also too. Sometime line are same in both the text. Both are not same in nature rather present text is very close to the *samuccaya* literature. It opens a new genre of Ancient Indian Intellectual tradition. An exhaustive, comparative study of *Itihāṣottama* and other texts, e.g. the *Mahābhārata* or the *Itihāṣasamuccaya*, can also be thought for better understanding of culture. There is still room for further speculation regarding the date and authorship of *Itihāṣottama*. Another area to explore in the future is the story of Vikukṣi has multiple versions spread in different texts, e.g., the *Viṣṇu Purāṇa* (4aṁśa 2nd adhyāya), the *Bhāgavata* (9th skanda 6th adhyāya), etc., and it would be interesting and necessary to compare them in the light of the *Itihāṣottama* version. For textual criticism and cross check with other literature the present author would like to aim at enlarging the ambit of research and acquire more insights into the text over time. this unfinished work as soon as possible.

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10.0 Bio note

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