

Classical Newari Literature

Although the high culture of the Nepal Valley has been a literate culture for the last millennium and a half, classical and hybrid Sanskrit appear to have been its main code till A.D. 1350s. The entire corpus of Licchavi epigraphy is in Sanskrit. Extant early Nepalese manuscripts dated between A.D. 920- A.D. 1350s are in Sanskrit. As late as A.D. 1383 plays written in Sanskrit were staged in the court.

Vernacularization of the literate culture took place at first in epigraphy (to reach the populace?) and then in manuscripts. Hodgson (1828) hypothesized that the switch over to vernacular took place because of the decline of Sanskrit learning. Bendall (1903) and Petech (1958), on the other hand, suggested that the patronage extended to the Newar language since the A.D. 1380s was an offshoot of a literary renaissance. This may be part of explanation. The literate culture of South Asia was to undergo a transformation after the rise of the New Indo- Aryan languages (ca. A.D. 1000). Some of the earliest vernacular texts were found in the Nepal Valley. After the advent of Islam in India (A.D. 1193- 97) the arrival of fugitive southern immigrants in Nepal had been a regular feature. The flight of Maithil King Harisimha Deva (A.D. 1325) to Nepal had left a powerful impact, not only on her social and political life, but also on her literary life. The rise of classical Newari literature is one of its consequences.

We do not know when the Newari language was committed to writing. The earliest dated inscription in the language is dated NS 293 (A. D. 1173); the earliest authentically dated manuscript in the language is *Mānavanyāyaśāstra* (NS 500/ A.D. 1380). However, in the running Sanskrit texts of Licchavi epigraphy (A. D. 464- 879) there are numerous identifiable Newari nominals- a fact which indisputably proves that the Newari- speakers had been inhabiting the Nepal Valley much before the Sanskrit- using Licchavis arrived. Besides, the word “*Newārī*” is of no great antiquity. Its earliest incidence in the local sources goes back to NS 672/ A. D. 1652. it is simply a colloquial or Prakrit variant of Sanskritized classical “Nepāla” (ca. 4th A. D.). The Capuchin missionaries who arrived in Nepal in the late 17th century and early 18th century, and the 19th- century British authors such as Kirkpatrick, Hamilton, and Hodgson popularized the term “*Newārī*”. The language, however, was called “Nepāla Bhāṣā” in manuscripts dated since A.D. 1380 and inscriptions dated since A.D. 1410.

Following Jorgensen (1936; 1941), the term "classical Newari" is used here as a descriptive term, not as a term of literary or critical evaluation, to refer to the older dialects of Newari used mostly in manuscripts dated between ca. A. D. 1360- 1900 (i.e., before modern Newari was set to printing). For the purpose of this paper, the term literature is used, not in the restricted sense of *belles lettres* (*Kāvya*), but in the sense of written texts (*vāṅmaya*), including *śāstras*.

Classical Newari literature exists in all the three major genres- - - prose, poetry, and drama. It began as a bilingual literature of translation and commentary in prose under the court patronage of Jayasthitirāja Malla (A. D. 1382- 1395). The earliest group of manuscripts belongs to this period.

The largest number of classical Newari manuscripts belong to prose genres; the smallest to the genre of drama (24 in all). It is estimated that there are some 1600 secular and religious compositions in verse. Only a fraction of these texts have come out in print. Most of these texts are scattered in Nepalese and foreign collections (the National Archives, London, Oxford, Cambridge, Paris, Berlin, and Leningrad libraries), and in some private collections such as Prem Bahadur Kansakar's.

In prose there are three species of texts. A. Technical prose (*śāstras*); B. Narrative prose (i. religious texts, mainly Hindu *purāṇas* and Buddhist *avadānas*; ii. didactic narratives, such as *Hitopadeśa*, and iii. popular narratives such as *Vetālapañcaviṃśatikā*, *Sukabahatari* and *Battisputtalikā*), and C. Historical prose (*vaṃśāvalīis* and *thyāsaphūs*). With the exception of historical prose, all species of classical Newari prose literature are modeled on Sanskrit originals as translation, commentaries, and free recensions. Popular and Buddhist texts, on the other hand, are recensions which take considerable liberties with the Indian models, often adding various local elements, flavour, and stories in the process of rendering into Newari. As a literary medium, classical Newari doesn't exhibit a high degree of creativity, cultivation, refinement and sophistication in prose as it does in poetry.

The repertoire of classical Newari poetry is by far the richest of the three genres. This is so also in terms of the exploitation of verbal resources and creative use of the language. The total range of themes, feelings, sentiments, and attitudes in the corpus of poetry is, indeed, fairly wide. Love songs, ballads, working songs, Kṛṣṇa songs and various other species of religious poetry are the leading genres. The earliest poems go to the A.D. 1570s.

Classical Newari dramas are based on stories from the epics and *puranas*. Nearly all of these were written by the Malla Kings during the 17th and 18th centuries. The structure and techniques of these plays were "in essentials a part of an old and pervasive type which was to be found from Kathmandu to Cape Comorin" (Hein, 1972). Some of their elements were "directly obtained from the Maithili dramas popularized by Vidyapati Thakur" (Mishra, 1949:25). The most predominant interest in these plays are mimetic, musical and operatic (mime, music, and dance) rather than strictly dramatic (plot, character, conflict and crisis). A number of these plays are strings of songs with no intervening dialogues- all set to traditional archetypes of *rāgas* and *tālas*.

Classical Newari literature exists mainly in the form of manuscripts- - - some 1000 manuscripts written in older dialects and scripts. They have not yet been even

adequately catalogued. So scholars have hitherto ignored them. This literature may not be of outstanding merit, but it deserves to be studied and analyzed before one passes any judgment on the tradition.

Out of some 500 dialects and languages of the Sino- Tibetan family of languages, Newari is one of the five languages with a literary tradition of some age and merit. Although Newari is a Tibeto- Burman language by stock, its literary dialects are deeply influenced by the Indo- Aryan dialects, models, and traditions. Just as Newar social and cultural systems are a product of a fusion of two streams, similarly classical Newari literature is a most tangible evidence of the symbiosis between a Tibeto- Burman language and the Indo- Aryan literate culture.

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