

# **Human Sacrifice for Freedom: A study of Medieval Gujarati Folk-song “Mayavel”**

Literature and society have close ties and great influences over each other and therefore one of the modes of literary study has been to view literature as socio- historical document. Literature ‘represents’ life which is in large measure a social reality and it ‘uses’ language as its medium which is a social creation in itself. Thomas Warton argues that literature has “the peculiar merit of faithfully recording the features of the times and of preserving the most picturesque and expressive representation of manners.”<sup>1</sup>

But this traditionally oversimplified idea of correlation between literature and society includes ambiguity in itself. Rene Wellek notes: “A writer inevitably expresses his experience and total conception of life; but it would be manifestly untrue to say that he expresses the whole of life or even the whole life of a given time completely and exhaustively.”<sup>2</sup> Often a literary work deals with the issues raised by marginalized groups within a society. In Indian society where the caste-system has been prevalent, a literary work often emerges to be voicing in defense of one social group against another. Attempts have been made therefore to propound theories of ‘Lalit’ and ‘Dalit’ writings. Viewed in this context, the case of Dalit folk-literature seems to be even more complex since it becomes the literature of the down trodden and being folk literature remains literature of mouth than in written forms. The practice of ignoring Dalit folk-literature as limited in themes in comparison to the main stream literature is often found at least

among some of the groups of Gujarati critics. Yet Dalit folk-literature has several features of its own. The predominance of the oral nature of composition and transmission is an important feature of Dalit folk-literature. In fact Dalit folk-literature in Gujarat has been in contrast to ‘Lalit’ literature found in the Sanskrit and Prakrit manuscripts. Verbal repetition in Dalit folk-literature indeed sharpens memory in absence of written forms. It has helped specially those who were not entitled to study standard Sanskrit and Prakrit texts and for whom the main stream literature was almost unattainable. In its imagery, rhythm and language, the main stream literature often seems to be removed from the experience of everyday life on account of its highly ornate style. Dalit folk-literature on the other hand reflects the pain of living in a society where the caste-system is prevalent and thus it voices the collective consciousness of a group. Embellishment of language appears to be an outstanding feature of the main stream literature, while metrical and grammatical imperfection emerges to be a part of effective expression in Dalit folk-literature. If the main stream literature aims at ornamental language including metrical exactitude and figures of speech, Dalit folk-literature often seems to celebrate its imperfections and incompleteness. Above all Dalit folk-literature provides an alternative aesthetics to the main stream literature. The primary concern of the main stream literature has been considered to be a permanent search of beauty and to describe the beauty in the most beautifying language. Dalit folk-literature harps upon the pain of being marginalized by those who enjoy the center in the society.

## II

“Mayavel” is a medieval Gujarati Dalit folk-song which becomes an important socio- historical document of medieval Gujarat. It describes a Dalit sage’s sacrifice; an event of much importance which is however ignored both in standard texts on history of Gujarat and literature which was then considered to be an occupation of the high Hindus. Siddharji Jaysinh of Patan was the ruler of medieval Gujarat who constructed Sahastra Ling Lake and built a great step-well in Patan known as “Raniki Vav.’ For construction of Sahastra Ling Lake, he called the people of Ode community among whom was Jasma, a beautiful, but married woman. The King sent all workers except Jasma after completion of his Sahastra Ling Lake. Jasma read the lustful eyes of the King and tried to escape, but the King chased her and killed her husband. Jasma stabbed herself dying after her husband and cursing the King that his Sahastra Ling Lake would never get water. To find solution to the curse the Pundits advised the King for human-sacrifice (Narmedh) of a man full of 32 qualities as described in Shashtras. The pundits found Maya, a Dalit as an ideal form of “Narmedh” and Maya sacrificed himself asking in return social equality of his people. In medieval Gujarat, Dalits lived in the outskirts of the city and had to wear horns of deer around their waist for their identity and were forced to tie large brooms in such a way that their footsteps could be obliterated. They were not allowed to fetch water from central ponds and wells. Maya sacrificed himself for the betterment of his community and for water which is the elixir for all living beings. He asked for good clothes to wear for his community, food to eat and land to till, but above all he stood for the social dignity of his community. “Mayavel” a medieval folk-song in Gujarati, deals with the martyrdom of Maya.

Examining “Mayavel” in detail, it honestly reflects a few facets of medieval Gujarat and becomes an important socio-historical document. It includes three characters from history of medieval Gujarat - King Siddharaj Jaysinh of Patan, Jasma and Maya. In a way it brings forth the pattern of the sinner, the victim(s) and the Redeemer; the sinner is King Siddharaj Jaysinh of Patan, the main victim is Jasma and other victims are the waterless people in the kingdom of Patan and the Redeemer is Maya who sacrifices himself for the welfare of his own community and for water which is the need of all living beings. It does bring forth the pattern of sin, punishment and spiritual rebirth, but its central theme is human sacrifice (“Narmedh”). Whereas Dalit literature is generally believed to be propounding the poetics of resistance, “Mayavel” emerges with that of sacrifice. This medieval Gujarati folk-song includes 104 lines in total and consists of three movements.

The first movement is in “Duha”, a leisurely style of singing which gradually acquaints the listeners with the socia-political details of medieval Gujarat and its ruler Siddharaj Jaysinh:

“Ēkō, yr,,,th yuftō<sup>TM</sup>u, ...txý...wh {tuĪth  
 hts fhu ĒÄhtsS, Ētu÷kfe ĒhĀeth.  
 fhýĒuðhtu Āefhtu, {e<sup>TM</sup>āĒuðe r<sup>TM</sup>s {t,,  
 puð...kÚt ...tāu Ēne, ...htç{e «ĪPt,.

**rĒæÄ...wh ĒwkĒh „t{{tk, n,wk rþð÷P sunwk  
 {qꣳhtsu fkÄtrðPwk ...qhý feÄw ,un,  
 Ēkð, yr,,þth yuftð<sup>TM</sup>u, fþtuo ...qhý rþð{tꣳ  
 yýne÷ðtzu ,u ...Ae, ¾tuĒe Ēhtuðh ...tĒ.”<sup>3</sup>**

The folk-song begins with the description of Siddharaj Jaysinh of Patan, his accession to the throne, his dynasty, his sect and buildings which he erected. The folk-song carries the record that Siddharaj Jaysinh came to the throne of Patan in Samvat 1151 and was the son of King Karandev and Rani Meenaldevi. A follower of Shaivism, he repaired Rudra Mahalaya in Siddhapur and then began his ambitious project of constructing the reservoir of Sahastra Ling. The socio-political details given in the folk-song conform to the standard historical records. Mohammed Ali Khan notes in his “Mirat-i-Ahmadi” that Siddharaj Jaysing of Patan ascended to the throne in Samvat 1151. He further notes of Siddharaj Jaysinh ; “... he constructed many other buildings such as the reservoir of Sahastra Ling at Patan. “<sup>4</sup> In Political History of Northern India”, Dr. Gulab Chandra notes: “ The family of Karan professed Shaivism.“<sup>5</sup> The folk-song then describes the advent of Jasma as one of the workers for construction of the Sahastra Ling Lake. Failed to seduce Jasma, the King kills her husband and Jasma, by committing suicide after her husband, becomes Sati. In the folk-song Modhera is mentioned as the place where Jasma commits suicide. Dying Jasma curses the King that his Sahastra Ling would be waterless and he would die childless.

**“Ēhtuðh{tk sꣳ<sup>TM</sup>ð Útþtu, r<sup>TM</sup>ðop {hòu htP,  
 htò ...txý ytðeþtu, Ēw:¾{tk rĒðĒ òP,”<sup>6</sup>**

Then follows the description of the Pundits' discovery of "batris-Iakshana Purush" in Maya and the latter musing upon the transitoriness of human-life agrees to sacrifice himself. The folk-song mentions even the place where Maya lived --Dholka of medieval Gujarat.

The second movement of the folk-song is in "Zoolana" metre which is associated with tragic sense of human-life. The description of the waste-land of Patan follows -lifeless trees, dead fish and birds and thirsty humans. After giving a tragic account of the waste-land of Patan, the second movement describes the coming of Maya as the Redeemer who would give his flesh and blood for the sake of others. The advent of Maya to the dry land of Patan is described with faithful devotion. Queens rush to balcony to have a glance at Maya, people welcome him with Akshat and Kumkum and even Brahmins look at him with faith. He has come to be sacrificed for the revival of the dead land of Patan and has become the Messiah in the eyes of Gujaratis. The second movement ends with Maya's sacrifice for the revival of the dried land of Patan.

The third movement is again in "Duha", a leisurely style of singing which gives the date and place of Maya's sacrifice. In Samvat 1194 in the month of Magh at Patan Maya sacrificed himself.

**“Ēkō, yr,,p̄thtu [tuhtýw<sup>TM</sup>e Ēt÷{tk  
ysōtæ Ēt,{<sup>TM</sup>u {t½ {tĒu  
yýne÷...wh ...txýu ntu{týtu {tPōtu  
Ēhōh A÷ftýtk ÷U,, {tÚtu.”7**

### III

The main stream literature of medieval Gujarat centres on the political career and prowess of Siddharaj Jaysinh of Patan. Muni Hemchandra eulogized prosperous reign of the King in his “Duyasraya - Kavya” and the poet laureate of the court of Patan Sripal wrote “Prasastis” in praise of Siddharaj Jaysinh. The main stream literature of medieval Gujarat written by Hindu and Jain poets silences itself on the stigmatic aspect of the King. But Dalit folk-literature on Maya both in prose and metrical composition centres on Maya’s sacrifice supplying historical details of the event. The folk-song “Mayavel” is a piece from Dalit Folk-literature on Maya which carries a record of sacrifice deliberately ignored in the main stream literature of medieval Gujarat. Its material has been transmitted through vocal utterance throughout ages. Despite the fact that he has not found a place in the main stream Gujarati and Sanskrit literature, Maya’s sacrifice has not been forgotten, but has always been inscribed in the heart of people. In 1930, in the College of Training for Teachers in Mumbai, Maya’s sacrifice has been included in the history textbook and it has inspired the Gujarati freedom-fighters for self- sacrifice against the British rule. Still in rural parts of North Gujarat Bhathis or folk-singers sing “Mayavel” with the accompaniment of a musical instrument traditionally called ”Ravanhattha”. Recently a Maya Temple in Patan has been built and there a religious fair is systematically organized every year on the day popularly called ‘Maya Satam’ to commemorate Maya’s sacrifice. On this day the folk-singers from many parts of Gujarat sing the songs of Maya and people dance with great faith. In Dalit community, Maya has been established as a Massiah and “Mayavel” as a religious epic of martyrdom.

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