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Ornaments in Medieval Bengali Literature: An Image of Contemporary Society

Snigdha Sinha

Assistant Teacher, Kolsur Girls' High School (WB Govt. Sponsored)
Kolsur, West Bengal, India

Abstract:

Medieval period is an eventful chapter in the history of India. A series of social changes were evident during that period. Indian literature of that period depicts not only the socio-economic or political conditions of medieval India, but it holds a vivid description of culture and traditions of people of the then India. Works of Bengali poets of that period become a document of the cultural heritage of the medieval population of eastern India. The adornment of characters created by Bengali poets with costume and jewellery suggests the people's tradition and socio-economic condition of that period. This study intends to explain how the Ornaments found in medieval Bengali Literature are connected with the customs, rituals and traditions of medieval Indian society.

Key words: Ornaments, Medieval Bengali Literature, Contemporary Society

1. Introduction

History of Ornaments is as old as the history of human civilization. The earliest Indian civilization, Indus Valley Civilization holds examples of using ornaments and jewellery by the people of that time. In ancient Indian sculpture and paintings we find a wide variety of jewellery worn by the men and women of ancient India. But the rich Indian literature in different languages has enough evidence of using Ornaments by Indian people of different ages. The history of medieval Indian literature is rich in its variety and quality. The period between eighth and eighteenth century was an eventful one in the perspective of Indian politics. The frequent changes of domestic dynasties and repeated invasion of foreign rulers had an impact on Indian social life. The political and social conditions of that period greatly influenced the traditions, religions, rituals and folk culture of India. Bengali literature being an important part of Indian literature of that time reflects a vivid image of contemporary East Indian society. When the characters in the works of the Bengali poets of that era were carefully ornamented with a wide variety of jewellery made of metal, clay, stone and some times of flowers and herbs we manage to get an account of folk culture of the then society of India.

2. Medieval Period of Bengali Literature

The Bengali literature has developed to its mature state through the ages, although, we may find its foot prints in the earlier stages of the development of Indian literature. The journey began with the forty seven spiritual hymns now known as *Chryapada* composed by Buddhist monks. Later, with the development of the literature the works of the Bengali poets of different ages differ between themselves in essence and taste. The total length of the literature is divided chronologically as Ancient period (650-1200 AD), Medieval period (1200-1800AD), and the Modern period (1800 AD to the present time).

The Early Medieval Period is a short period with some less remarkable works like the sayings and anecdotes of Khana or Ramai Pandit's narrative poem *Sunyapurana*. During the Pre-Chaitanya period Bengali literature developed its three main wings; - Vaishnava Literature, Mangala Literature, and Translation Literature. Vaishnava Literature is enriched with the works of Baru Chandidas and/ or other Chandidas' (if there is any). The remarkable work of this era is of course *Srikrsnakirtan* edited by Basantaranjan Ray Vidvadvallabh and published in 1916 by Bangiya Sahitya Parisat. Padavali literature includes the works of Chandidas, Gobindadas, Jnanadas, Lochandas, , Raysekhar, Sasisekhar, Balaram Das, Narottam Das, Narahari Das and Radhamohan Thakur. The translated literature includes *Srikrisnavijay* of Maladhar Basu; Sanskrit *Bhagavata*, *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata* translated into Bengali by different poets of that period. The translations from Arabic and Persian works by Muslim poets also enriched Bengali literature. For example, Daulat Uzir Bahram Khan's *Laily-Majnu*, evidently composed between 1560 and 1575, is a thematic translation of the

Persian poet Zami's *Laily-Majnu*. A great extent of *Mansamangals* and *Chandimangals* composed by different poets of medieval period enriched the literature.

The great works of Chaitanya era are Jayananda's *Chaitanyamangal*, Brindabandas' *Chaitanyabhagavat*, and Krishnadas Kviraj's *Chaitanyacharitamrta*. The Late Medieval Period of Bengali literature includes the works of Muslim poets as Alaol and Daulat Qazi; *Annadamangal* by Raigunakar Bharatchandra; Shakta Padavali by Ramprasad Sen and Kamalakanta Bhattacharya and the great Baul Songs by Lalon Fakir.

3. Ornaments in Different works of Bengali Poets

A wide variation of Ornament and jewellery is evident in the works of medieval Bengali poets. The characters not only wore jewellery to adorn them, but jewellery and ornaments found in the medieval Bengali literature had some social, religious and traditional values. The poets ornamented their women characters from head to foot fingers by a variety of adornments. In the *Ramayana* the scattering of ornaments by abducted Sita signifies utilitarian presentation of ornaments by the poet. Ramachandra gave his finger ring to his Hanumana for the authentication of his representation and Sita sent her hair-ornament to Rama as a token of her meeting with Hanumana. In the second pada of *Chryapada* we find "*kaanet chouri nilo adhorati*" which expresses the stealing of ear-ornament of woman. In the translated *Mahabhrata* we find a large extent of ornaments and jewellery used by the male and female characters of the epic. *Mahabhrata* gives us an account of royal ornaments and costumes of ancient and early medieval India.

In *Srikrishnakirtan* Radha described her beloved Krishna as "*Nirmal kamal bawane nil utpal nayone ratan kuntal shobhe kanne// Manik dashanjuti gitro shobhe gajamukh jitro rahi tar dordan*". The ornaments of Sri Krishna signify the practice of wearing ornaments by men. On the other hand, Radha adorn herself with flowers and herbs at Brindavan as described in the *Srikrishnakirtan*, - "*supotu nasa tilfule*"; "*ashok tabok karojugale*"; "*sirish kusum tonusakole*"; etc. In *Danakhanda* Radha lost her satlahori har, - "*chintian pelaibo badayi satesari har*". We also find the description of Sridam in Baisnab Padavali - "*Go-chandan dore kanuhi shobhe kane kuntal khela// Gale lombito gunjaha bhuje angad bala*" - also express the use of male ear and arm ornaments.

In *Mnasamangal* a woman worshiper of Manasa had to wear ornaments on one half of her body following the instruction of Manasa. In *Annadamangal* we notice the amazing adornment of lord Shiva, - "*Bhushan Bhishon tar, gale fonihar*". Here a snake is worn by lord Shiva as a garland. Mukundaram in his description of goddess Saraswati says the deity has worn a garland of jewels, - "*kanthe bhushon monimoy har*". Dwijamadhab in his *Mangal Chander Git* presented a large variety of ear-ornaments. In *Chaitanyabhagavat* Sri Chaitanya is adorned with *tilaka* (a clay art on forehead) and flower garlands.

4. Contemporary Society and ornaments

Ornaments for royal people: It is evident that an adornment bears a mark of its contemporary society. Apart from poetry we can get an account of religious practice, customs, rituals and traditions of the population of contemporary society from inscriptions, sculptures, paintings and from the writings of foreign travellers. Abul Fazl gives a list of thirty seven ornaments that were used by the royal women of Mughals. Mughal rulers were fond of jewellery and highly valued ornaments. Not only mughals but all the royal families of medieval India enjoyed luxurious lives. Both royal men and women used ornaments made of gold and valuable jewels like pearls, ruby, sapphires, diamond, etc. Very often the rulers give their people some jewellery as rewards.

Ornaments for common people: For common people Gold was a rare metal to wear as ornaments, rather, to them, gold was a medium of savings. The low-earning people of that age used to wear ornaments of terracotta, bronze, copper and silver. Pearl was a precious jewel in medieval India and the common people seldom had a chance to wear ornaments of pearls. Evidences of using costume and jewellery by the people of a particular time and region throw light on the socio-economic condition of the said population.

Ornaments for women: Women of all region, places and times are fond of ornaments. Historical evidences are there that Indian women have been using ornaments since the ancient age. Indian women used to adorn their head, ear, nose, neck, arms, wrist, fingers, anklets and foot-fingers with ornaments. Sheesphul, Mangtika and Sinthi are kinds of head ornaments of Indian women of medieval age. Ear ornaments of different types, sizes and shapes bear different names like Kanbala, Chakravali, Kundal, Pipalpatti, etc. Thus a great number of ornaments worn by women over their bodies are recorded in the literature that depicts the social tradition of that era. The religion and rituals had a remarkable influence on using ornaments. Hindu women used to wear ornaments not only to adorn themselves but ornaments were suhag-chinh for the married women while the widows had no right to wear an ornament.

Ornaments for men: The medieval literature suggests that not only woman but man also used to wear many kinds of ornament. Ornaments of royal men are discussed earlier. Mahabharata, the great epic indicates the abundant uses of ornaments by Indian men of medieval period. The religious character Sri Krishna is adorned with different ornaments by poets of different ages. It is found that ear rings and garlands were common ornaments of men of that period.

Folk ornaments: Indian folk lore contains a basket of folk ornaments that leads us to perceive rich Indian folk tradition of different parts of India. Folk ornaments are made of base metals, stone, wood, herbs, etc. It is evident that some Indian tribes wear the parts of the body of dead animals as ornaments. Bengali literature said of the practice of using such folk ornaments as we find in the description of lord Shiva wearing a snake around his neck. Sri Chaitanya may be considered as the pioneer of using *tilaka*, a pious adornment for baishnavas.

5. Conclusion

Ornaments are commonly used by the people around the world. But the types vary according to times and places. This only suggests the social impact on people's adornment. The precious literary works in Bengali language give us enough space to peer into the

contemporary society. The present study has drawn out an extract of the ornamented part of vast and rich medieval Bengali poetry. The author, at last, came to the conclusion that ornaments used by the medieval Indian people were not only ornamental in nature but it has a close relation with the traditions, customs and rituals of the contemporary society.

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