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## Kshemendra: A Versatile Genius

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### Abstract

Kashmir, the crown of India found its first and oldest written account in the sixth century Sanskrit Classic, the Nilmatpurana. The most outstanding contribution of Kashmir to the rich and varied cultural heritage of India has been the development and spread of the Sanskrit language and literature. Kashmiri Pandits took pains "in keeping the Sanskrit language pure and perfect". Kashmiri authors have made valuable contribution to Sanskrit language and literature. Kashmiri writers have produced a galaxy of poets and dramatists in Sanskrit. Influenced by the natural beauty of their homeland, its lofty mountains, lakes, waterfalls and charming flowers of multitudinous colours, they wrote dramas, epics, lyrical as well as dialectical poems, essays, fiction and anthologies. Having achieved a high distinction in Sanskrit language and literature, some of the poets and writers made a mark in the rest of India where they were welcomed with honour. One of such writers is Kshemendra.

**Keywords:** Kashmir, Sanskrit, Kshemendra, Satire

### Introduction

Kashmir, the crown of India found its first and oldest written account in the sixth century Sanskrit Classic, the Nilmatpurana, which begins with a legend: a vast lake, Satisar (Lake of Sati, the consort of Shiva), surrounded by towering snow - bound mountains, was inhabited by a demon, Jalodbhava (Born of Water). His victims, the Nags, inhabitants of the mountainous region, appealed to the sage Kashyap, for deliverance. Since the demon was invincible within water, his element, the sage did great penance and was thus able to secure divine intervention. The mountain to the west of the lake was pierced with a trident and water drained away through this gorge. The demon, deprived of his elements, was easily slain by Vishnu. The valley that emerged from under the water was Kashmir, a name said to be the corrupt form of Kashyappur or Kashyap Mar or stretching a point, Ka (water) shimir (desiccated).

The most outstanding contribution of Kashmir to the rich and varied cultural heritage of India has been the development and spread of the Sanskrit language and literature. Besides, it was through this medium that humanities, philosophy, religion, medicine, history, law and policy, in which Kashmiris made a mark, were propagated not only in the rest of India, but in Central and Southeast Asia too. How and when Kashmir became the centre of Sanskrit learning may be traced to the Aryans. Carrying with them Sanskrit, the repository of their cultural heritage, they passionately devoted themselves to its study, enriching it further through the writings of poets, dramatists and Vedic philosophers. Sanskrit became the language of religion and polite literature and in the words of Bilhana who lived as late as the 9th century A.D., even women in Kashmir spoke Sanskrit fluently.

Kashmiri Pandits took pains "in keeping the Sanskrit language pure and perfect". Kashmiri authors have made valuable contribution to Sanskrit language and literature. Kashmiri writers have produced a galaxy of poets and dramatists in Sanskrit. Influenced by the natural beauty of their homeland, its lofty mountains, lakes, waterfalls and charming flowers of multitudinous colours, they wrote dramas, epics, lyrical as well as dialectical poems, essays, fiction and anthologies. Having achieved a high distinction in Sanskrit language and literature, some of the poets and writers made a mark in the rest of India where they were welcomed with honour. One of such writers is Kshemendra.

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### Kshemendra

Kshemendra is a prominent figure in the history not only of poetics but also of Sanskrit literature as a whole. Endowed with a master mind he had a variety of interests, and wrote quite a number of treatises on diverse subjects. He is truly described as a polymath. Happily for us, he gives an account of his personal history, and records the dates of the composition of some of his works. Son of Prakasendra and grandson of Sindhu, he was a disciple of one Gangaka. By birth he was a Saiva but laterly, under the teachings of Somacarya Bhagavata, he became Vaisnava. Father of Somendra, he was preceptor of Udayasimha and prince Laksanaditya. Kshemendra wrote his works in the reign of the Kashmirian king Ananta and his son Kalasa; as such, he may be assigned to the second and third quarters of the eleventh century A.D. He was born in a well-to-do family.

Kshemendra is silent about the date of his birth. He studied literature under "the foremost teacher of his time, the celebrated Shaiva philosopher and literary exponent Abhinavagupta". He says in his Bharata-Manjari that he studied literature with Abhinavagupta, author of the Vidyavivrti of the Pratyabhijna- Vrhativimarsini. As Abhinavagupta composed his famous commentary on Pratyabhijna philosophy in A.D. 1014 it is apparent that Kshemendra was born much earlier. His Dasavataracarita was composed in the Laukika year 4141 or A.D. 1066. Probably he lived a little longer.

His course of studies seems to have comprised all the sciences and arts then known in Kashmir. He had a thorough knowledge of mathematics, astrology, medicine, surgery, politics, erotica, and Buddhist philosophy. Kshemendra says that he left the company of dry logicians and grammarians but studied all the lexicons of his time. He was particularly fond of songs, gathas, novels and interesting conceits of poetry.

Kshemendra was a versatile genius. He wrote poems, narratives, didactic and satiric sketches and treatises on rhetoric and prosody, and possibly a commentary on the Kama Sutra. Around eighteen of Kshemendra's works are still extant while fourteen more are known only through references in other literature. His Bharatamanjari, Ramayanamanjari, Brhathathamanjari, Padyakadambari (lost) and Avadanakalpalata are, respectively, the abstracts of the two great epics, the Mahabharata and the Ramayana, Gunadhya Brhatkatha, Bana's Kadambari and the Buddhist Avadanas. All these were written in verse. Among his other works, known only by name, are Sasivamsamahakavya, Amrtarangakavya, Avasarasara, Muktavali Vatsyayana-sutra-sara, Lalitaratnamale, Kanakajanaki, Nrpavali, Lavanyavati and Pavanapancasika. His known and printed works include Nitikalpataru, Carucarya, Desopadesa, Narmam;ala, Nitilata, Vinayavalli. Darpadalana, Sevayasevakopadesa, Munimatamimamsa, Caturvarga-Samgraha Aucityavicarcarca Kavikanthabharana and Dasavataracarita.

Kshemendra's contribution to Sanskrit literature is unique in one respect. He introduces social satire, mixed with humour and sarcasm. In "Samayamatrika", a poem of eight chapters, he describes the arts and trickeries of the harlot. The merit of the work lies in its vivid description of droll life painted with great sharpness of phrasing and characterisation. In this work, he narrates the story of the wanderings of a courtesan in the Valley. It is an interesting specimen of satire rarely found in Sanskrit literature, on

strolling musicians, women beggars, shop girls, saints, thieves and other classes of people.

His "kalavilasa" is a satirical poem of ten cantos in which Muladeva, the legendary master of trickery instructs his young disciple in the arts of roguery. In this poem, he depicts various occupations and follies of the people of the time, such as physicians, traders, astrologers, goldsmiths, harlots and saints. Ksemendr's Desopadesa and Narmamala, like Kalavilasa, also represent his satirical proclivity of mind.

Kshemendra's "Desopadesa" exposes all kinds of sham in society through the caricatures of the life of various depraved sections of the community, such as cheats, misers, prostitutes, bawds, voluptuaries, students from Gauda (Bengal), old men married to young girls, degraded Saiva Gurus, the ignorant grammarians etc. The Narmamala is a sharp satire on the misrule and oppression of the Kayasthas, before the time of Ananta. Sanskrit poetry continued to flourish in Kashmir even in the thirteen century. The deep religious tendency among Kashmiris inspired them to write devotional songs.

His Sevayasevakopadesa contains shrewd reflection on the relation between master and servant. The Carucarya, a century of moral aphorisms is a collection of 100 Sanskrit Slokas. The first half of each Sloka enunciates a moral principle or a Dharma, the second half of each Sloka gives an example or an episode to illustrate the moral principle of Dharma stated in the first half of each Sloka. In this work, Kshemendra gives a pleasing picture of virtue's ways of pleasantness in contemporary Kashmir. The Caturvargasamgraha deals with the four objects of human life, dharma, arthal, kama and moksa. The Darpadalana is a denunciatory harrangue against human pride which is said to have sprung from birth, wealth, learning, beauty, velour, charity and asceticism. They are dealt separately in each chapter with illustrations on each type of boaster.

His works on poetics are two, viz. the Aucityavicarcarca and the Kavi-kanthabharana. The Aucitya-vicarcarca of Kshemendra is a unique work in the sense that it deals with the question of Aucitya or propriety in Kavya most exhaustively. In this work, Kshemendra tries to propound that propriety or aucitya is the soul (jivitabhuta) of Kavya or poetry and in his opinion, relates to twenty-seven items, viz. word, sentence, sense of the composition, literary excellences (gunas), poetic figures, employment of grammatical matters like verb, preposition, etc., time, place and so on, if they overstep their proper limits, hurt the rasa. What renders his work more valuable is the collection of verses culled from a wide range of classical Sanskrit literature. Some of these verses are given as conforming to Aucitya while others are examples of compositions devoid of it. Kshemendra follows in the footsteps of Anandavardhana who holds Aucitya as the highest secret (para upanisat) of Rasa. The idea of Aucitya, anticipated by Bharata in connexion with dramaturgy, and explicitly dealt with by writers of the Dhvani School and discussed by most post-Dhvani writers in connexion with Rasa-dosa, found the strongest exponent in Kshemendra. He considers it to be founded on the aesthetic pleasure (camatkara) that underlies the delectation of Rasa. No Guna or Alankara, devoid of Aucitya, has any significance in Kavya according to Kshemendra.

In the Kavikanthabharana, Kshemendra deals with the making of a poet, his defects, the peculiar charm

(camatkara) of a poetical composition, the Gunas and Dosas of words, sense and sentiment (rasa). There are, according to Kshemendra, two things that engender in a person the capacity for producing Kavya. The first one is Divyaprayatna (divine effort) and the second is Paurusa or individual effort. Divya-prayatna is the name given to prayer, incantation and the like. In discussing Paurusa-prayatna, he states that there are three kinds of persons according as they require little effort, strenuous effort or as they are incapable of poetic power despite effort. A poet, in his opinion, must possess knowledge of the various arts and sciences a list of which is given by him. The various branches of knowledge include, inter alla, (grammar, Logic, Dramaturgy, Erotics, Astronomy etc. While discussing the question of one poet borrowing from another, he mentions different kinds of borrowers or plagiarists. Of them, some borrow an idea, a word or the foot of a verse while others copy an entire composition. He mentions, apparently with approval, the practice of borrowing from sources like the work of Vyasa. Incidentally Kshemendra dwells on the training of a poet and the moulding of his life and character. An important part of the work is devoted to discussion on camatkara or the peculiar charm which is an essential requisite of a poetical composition. Camatkara has been divided into ten varieties in accordance with its nature and substratum. It may be readily comprehensible or realisable after much thought. It may reside in the whole of a composition or in a part of it and belong to sabda, artha or both, to alankara, rasa or may relate to the nature of a famous subject-matter. Kshemendra's Dasavataracarita gives in regular Kavya style, an account of the ten incarnations of Visnu, viz., Matsya, Kurma, Varaha, Nrsimha, Vamana, Parasurama, Rama, Krsna, Buddha and Karkya, which is nothing but an abstraction of the Puranic stories.

Kshemendra's contribution to Sanskrit literature has only recently been fully appreciated: the first of the 34 works attributed to him was discovered in 1871. Eighteen works have been found in total, of which several are devotional and technical works and four satirical. Haksar, the writer who translated his satires, has already done much to establish the poet's reputation beyond the academic community with his translation of the Samaya Matrika or The Courtesan's Keeper which is a sustained satirical narrative about a shape-shifting pimp. The satires, set in Kshemendra's native Kashmir, paint a similar picture of a society in hot pursuit of sex and money, preferably combined.

Although the first work, Narma Mala or A Garland of Mirth, takes a narrative form, the other two, Kala Vilasa (A Dalliance with Deceptions) and Deshopadesha (Advice from the Countryside), are more a string of well executed vignettes. In these satires, the story, at any rate, is of secondary consideration. It is in the details that Kshemendra's pen cuts most deeply, particularly in his fresh and often shocking similes. The guru whose mouth twitches "like the cunt of an old she-buffalo" is not quickly forgotten, and for sure, Haksar does justice to the often filthy language of the original. But the humour is not all bawdy. The foreign student for whom "even a river is considered insufficient for his purificatory rites" but who happily tucks into the leftover dinner and drink of the harlot he has engaged for the evening has a glow "like that of an unlit lamp".

No one, not even a Buddhist nun, not even poets themselves, is spared in these satires by Kshemendra. At times, Kshemendra can seem a little old-fashioned: working wives and women who enjoy a good party are among those he condemns as "demons of a thousand deceptions in the dark night of this degenerate age". But his castigation of cheating officials resonates loud and clear.

Kshemendra's wit and cynicism are never far from the surface. A beautiful description of Ujjain at dusk mixes the conventional with his own particular style; "the sun...disappeared slowly from the sky like a gambler stripped bare by cheats". For the most part we are invited to mock as well as condemn the astrologer who consults "knowledgeable fisherman" about the likelihood of rain, the doctor who must kill thousands of patients with experimental concoctions before establishing his reputation, and the man who gives himself love bites and smears lipstick on his collar before going out.

### Conclusion

Kshemendra, the versatile genius, the prolific writer, the great litterateur 'was not a man to hide his light under a bushel, and he has taken care to let us know a good deal about himself and his time'. He believed that

"A poet should learn with his eyes  
The forms of leaves -  
He should know about oceans and mountains  
In themselves,  
And the sun and the moon and the stars.  
His mind should enter into the seasons,  
He should go  
Among many people  
In many places  
And learn their languages. (Kavikanthabharana)

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