

Book Review

Makhan Jha: The Sacred Complex in Janakpur

The Sacred Complex in Janakpur. (Indological, Sociological, Anthropological and Philosophical Study of Hindu Civilization). 1971. Makhan Jha. 152 pages, Photographs, Appendix: I to VI, Glossary. United Publishers. Allahabad, India. ICRs. 39/-.

I have read Mr. Makhan Jha's book entitled The Sacred Complex in Janakpur with great interest. It begins with a 12 page introduction highlighting the importance of social anthropology as well as the significance of study of civilization. Jha has tried to trace its origin and development, various symbols and their integrative character etc. He has also made a few references to the social scientists of the twentieth century who have studied Hinduism and its relation with the caste system. He has also claimed that his study rests mainly upon fieldwork done in Janakpur. In addition to intensive fieldwork, he has also consulted literary works, scriptures, hand books, religious texts and mythology regarding Janakpur.

The present book under review is divided into four parts which, in turn, are divided into nine chapters. In the first part there are three chapters. The writer has given a detailed description of the location of sacred centres like Dhanukha in Nepal and Girijasthan in India. He has also marked the religious significance of the sacred Kshetra which is characterised by a large number of temples, Kutis, ponds, Kundas, shrines and other ritual functionaries but he has not thrown sufficient light on the secular Kshetra like Kishoriji-kesthan (place of Kishori), Janakji-ke-darbar (court), Janakiji-ke-rejdhani (capital), Ramji-ke-sasural (marriage place) etc. He has just written the names of the above mentioned secular places. The writer has also failed to point out different symbolic expressions of gods and goddesses like Rama, Sita, Lakshmana, Dashratha, Janaka etc. through images of rivers, tanks, trees, stones, engravings etc. He has himself written, "For example in almost all temples, Rama, Sita, Lakshmana, Dashratha, Janaka etc. are represented through images which are installed in the temples" (p. 18). He has only explained symbolic representation of Hanuman, Siva and

Rajeshwari Devi. He has not only thrown light on sacred centres but also on sacred cluster and sacred segment. He has also tried to classify the different deities according to their importance. He has also determined the order or "hierarchy" of worship the word used by (T.R. Singh). Here again the writer has only mentioned the order of worship in the Rama temple cluster but has forgotten to mention the 'order of worship' in the Janaki temple cluster. We all know that the order of worship in both temples is not the same. He has also opined on the classification of different deities on the basis of 'food offerings' called as Naivedya or Prasad and on the basis of the Vrat (ritual fasting). He is also of opinion that different deities have status in the Hindu Universe.

The chapter 2 outlines the origin of Janakpur and Videha mythologically and legendarily. The writer has used sufficient materials of the mythology and various legends mentioned in the 'Mithila Mahatma' of the Brihad Vishnu Purana, the Vishnu Purana, the Ramayana and other religious scriptures and books. Some of the mythological stories are very interesting. Pilgrims who have not visited Janakpur would be curious to do so in the future after listening to these mythological stories. In the words of the writer, "These mythological accounts as also depicted in the epic, the smriti, the puranas etc. are the main source of inspiration, to the Hindu pilgrims in general and Maithil pilgrims in particular" (p. 29). Here the writer is quite correct to say so. It is also very helpful for universalisation and popularisation of a sacred Kshetra like Janakpur.

The writer has explained the transformation of various sacred centres. He has presented a comparative study of the present sacred centres and ancient sacred centres of Janakpur on the basis of sacred literature. He has given a good description of the ancient Kingdom. He has glorified the beautiful Rajmahal of King Sirdhwaj Janaka which is found in Janakpur, an ancient Kingdom of Mithila. He has also mentioned the boundary of ancient capital Janakpur according to Parasarji.

The writer has given many indications about the complete disappearance of the palaces of ancient times. This information may be helpful for the excavation and exploration of many important places and palaces which are extinct now. To support my saying I quote the following lines of the writer:

"The swarna-mandap (or Marwa) which has been vividly described in Mithila Mahatma may be located today towards the north-west of the Janaki temple, of course, in a ruined form" (p. 33).

We should be highly obliged to the writer for this kind of information and indication which is very essential from the point of view of excavation of these monuments. The writer has also given the list of ancient sacred Kutis, ponds and Kundas. He has also thrown light on the origin of modern Janakpur. He opined that some folk-shrines have been immensely influenced by some major sacred centres and here he is fully right. He has also thrown light on the patronage of the sacred centres but he has mistakenly called Ram Sarup Sahu an Indian. Actually he is a Nepali citizen. Here the writer also presents a comparative study of the Mahanthas of Pacharhi and Janakpur, respectively.

The second part of this book deals with the sacred performances, performed in Janakpur daily. The writer has concentrated not only on the pilgrimage and the pilgrims of Janakpur but he has also mentioned some places of pilgrimage of India and Nepal. He has focussed on the importance of pilgrimage for the pilgrims and explained how Janakpur has been a famous place of pilgrimage for the Hindus of the world since ancient times. The writer has committed a mistake while mentioning the name of His Late Majesty The King Mahendra Bir Bikram Shah Dev in the chapter four (p. 47). The chapter five outlines the main importance of fairs and festivals of Janakpur like Rama Navami (birth anniversary of Rama), Vivaha Panchami (marriage ceremony of Rama and Sita), Janaki Navami (birth anniversary of Sita), Parikrama (holy circumambulation), Mas (to stay for a month and worship continuously), Guru Purnima (worship of spiritual teacher), Jhulan (swinging festival), etc. The writer has collected authentic information with the help of many informants. This chapter is worth-reading but nobody can agree with the writer's following view, "Some other rituals like chhatha, chaurchand, devothan, nagpanchmi seem to have been borrowed from the Maithil Brahmins of Bihar" (p. 65).

These above-mentioned rituals are very popular and age-old in Janakpur and the surrounding areas of Nepal. These are not borrowed from Bihar at all.

Chapter six discusses the ethnographic details of the daily sacred performances and some of the broad concepts of the daily rituals. Here the writer has thrown sufficient light on the Arti which is performed regularly and punctually in each and every temple of Janakpur. He has also mentioned in detail the everlasting Samkirtan known as the 'Akhanda Sita-Rama Nama Samkirtan Mahayajna' organised by Shri Hanuman Maharaj'ji.

There are two chapters in part three of this book. The writer describes sacred specialists like Mahantha, priests, temple pandits, palmists, devotional singers, reciters, musicians, barbers and other sacred specialists like Mali (a florist caste) along with the functions, activities and duties of the Guthisamsthana very vividly. Chapter seven deals with the sacred specialists only. The writer has described the daily routine, life-style and standard of living of Mahanthas of temples of Janakpur in detail. It shows that he has all information regarding these Mahanthas. The authenticity of his information has been increased by interviewing these Mahanthas. He has also compared and contrasted the life-style of the Mahanthas of the Janaki temple and the Rama temple adequately. The writer has also given the lists of temple servants and their castes in the form of tables.

Chapter seven focusses on the organisation, functions and activities of the Guthisamsthana. Now all the temples of Janakpur are under it except the Janaki temple. This chapter also deals with the petty politics which is played in the Guthisamsthana but the writer has marked that the attitude of the pilgrims has remained unchanged in spite of this politics. It also indicates that the writer has also studied the mind of the pilgrims psychologically and sociologically in detail. He has presented recent changes among the community of ascetics. Nowadays many culprits have come and corrupted the pious attitude of both the ascetics and pilgrims. Being an anthropologist, the writer has produced a very interesting and useful study of these converted ascetics who are very dangerous to our society.

The writer has also quoted the version of his important informant like Pundit Jibnath Jha and Swami Abodh Kishore Das, who have narrated their own experience of 1949-50 when they were threatened by some of the such ascetics. We can take advantage of this information and can reform the community of ascetics in time.

Chapter eight of this book deals with the writer's own conclusion. It also includes photographs, appendices and bibliography. The writer has summarised the findings of the preceding eight chapters of his Ph.D. thesis in brief. The writer's decision is very remarkable and it is a universal truth, "The boundary of a nation is not the boundary of a civilization." We can easily agree with the writer that civilization has a great historic depth and territorial extension.

It is a fact that a Ph.D. thesis has its own limitations and a researcher cannot go beyond its limitations. Still the

present book gives much more authentic material on Janakpur. The writer has tried his best to furnish the readers with suitable and appropriate information regarding Janakpur. In my view if the writer would have given information of folk-lore, folk-songs and folk-deities then the present book would have become more useful and worth-reading for readers. The maxim that folk-songs are the autobiography of a person, is not a trite cliché, but a reality. Even then Mr. Makhan Jha deserves thanks because first of all he has provided sufficient materials regarding Janakpur for the foreign writers and readers.

In the last the writer has introduced oral tradition in the present book which makes this book more reliable and readable. The style of the writer is appreciable and understandable.

— R.D. Rakesh

Book Review

Cultural Heritage of Mithila. 1979. Vijayakant Mishra.
XIX, 416 pages, and plates XXIV. Mithila Prakasana. Allahabad,
India. IC Rs. 200/-.

The book under review (henceforth CHM) is divided into three parts. Part One consists of four chapters. Part Two consists of five chapters, and Part Three consists of three chapters.

Chapter I discusses in brief the origins of three rather well-known names of Mithila (e.g. Videha, Mithila, and Tirabhukti), and points to the references made to Mithila in various epics, Purāṇas, and Buddhist texts.

Chapter II is divided into two sections. Section 1 presents an account of the prehistoric Videhan monarchy and the so-called Aryanization of Mithila. Section 2 discusses the rise of the Vajjian confederacy in Mithila and presents brief accounts of Licchavi, Gupta, Pala and Śeṇa rule over Mithila. Unfortunately, the account is gravely marred by lack of organization and is rendered opaque by indiscriminate references to copious texts and quotations.

Chapter III deals with the political history of Mithila. It is also divided into two sections. Section 1 presents an account of the rule of the Karṇāṭa dynasty in Mithila, while section 2 discusses the rule of the Oinivāra dynasty in Mithila.

Chapter IV describes the House of the Khaṇḍavalākula rulers of Mithila.

Chapter V is divided into two sections. Section 1 discusses the religious customs and practices prevalent in Mithila in a rather monotonous, repetitive and platitudinous manner. Section 2 deals with the three main schools of philosophy as practised in Mithila, e.g. Nyāya, Navya-Nyāya, and Mīmāṃsā.

Chapter VI is also divided into two sections. Section 1 provides a cursory sketch of the Maithil scholars' predilection toward classical learning and refers to their contributions in

the fields of grammar, lexicography, poetics, metrics, erotics, and polity made through the medium of Sanskrit. Section 2 deals with the development of the Maithili literature with special reference to such early works as the caryāpadas (circa 800-1100 A.D.), the Vaṇaratnākara of Jyotirīśvara (14th century A.D.), and the works of the greatest Maithili poet, Vidyāpati (1360-1448 A.D.) and those of a few of his contemporaries.

Chapter VII deals with palaeography in Mithila. It is divided into two sections. Section 1 deals with the development of the Maithili script, called Mithilākṣara, and discusses some of its salient characteristics. Section 2 lists a few important inscriptions found in North Bihar: these inscriptions generally use Mithilākṣara characters but are in Sanskrit.

Chapter VIII deals with fine arts. It too is divided into two sections. Section 1 discusses the growth of the Mithila 'school' of music since antiquity, and traces the abiding influence of the karṇāṭaka musical tradition on it. Section 2 traces the growth of the art of the Aipana or Aripāna (women's art) in Mithila and discusses the copious references made to it in numerous ancient as well as modern Sanskrit texts.

Chapter IX is also divided into two sections. Section 1 is devoted to a discussion of medieval architecture in Mithila and discusses such topics as the palace, chaupali, gambling house, kaṭaka (military camp) -- all based on the information provided in the Vaṇaratnākara of Jyotirīśvara, and the temple architecture and temple types. Section 2 discusses the medieval sculptures of Mithila depicting the cults of Vaiṣṇavism Śaivism, and Śāktism. Some of the main sculptures (e.g. the figures of Gaṇeśa, Sūrya, Viṣṇu, Sakti -- especially Cāmuṇḍa, Maheśvari, Tārā, Mahiśāsūramardani, Śivaparvati, Rudra, Brahmā, Buddha, and Gaṅgā and Jamunā) found in Mithila in general and the district of Madhubani in particular are described in detail with great accuracy. Various architectural members (e.g. Pillars, door frames, doorjamb, lintel, gorgyle) are also described in this section.

Chapter X deals with the people of Mithila. However, in a 26 page chapter, 21 pages are devoted to a discussion of the Brahmana caste, while only 2 pages are devoted to the other castes of Mithila.

Chapter XI deals with the Mithila 'school' of law. It is divided into two sections. Section 1 discusses the sources of the Mithila 'school' of law and refers to such works as the Vivādacintāmaṇi of Vācaspati II, Vivādaratnākara of Caṇḍeśvara, Madan Parijata kalpataru of Lakṣmidhara, and the Vivādacandra of Misaru Mishra. A brief note on the biography and main works

of a few of the noted nibandhakāras (i.e., digest writers) is also provided in this section. Section 2 discusses the salient features of the Mithila 'school' of law, and dwells rather surreptitiously on such topics as marriage, adoption, minority and guardianship, partition, reunion, inheritance, stridhana (female property), and so on.

Chapter XII deals with an assortment of topics, i.e., peasant life, food and drink, festivals, betel leaf industry, coronation of the king, administrative organization, ascetic and his asrama (living place), pilgrimage to holy places, dress and manners, industry, metal works, coinage, flora and fauna, folk painting and other miscellaneous items. Much of the information is derived from the Varṇaratnākara of Jyotirīśvara.

The overambitiousness of CHM turns out to be both its virtue and its vice. As an attempt to do no less than explain the entire culture of Mithala, CHM represents the most comprehensive study so far available on this topic. Though praiseworthy in its concept, this study is nevertheless disappointingly inept in many aspects of its execution--presumably because the author did not take time to give careful treatment to each and every topic he felt obliged to include.

CHM may in fact be described as a perfect specimen of sloppy research. The sloppiness of research is reflected in innumerable grammatical and structural errors, inefficient organization of material, poor editing, and in the incredible lack of attention to certain technical matters (e.g. lack of proper citation, typographical errors, lack of correspondence between footnote numbers and between footnote numbers and their pages, indiscriminate use of single and double inverted commas, callous disregard for the sources of quotations, profuse use of vernacular words without italicizing or underlining or translating them, lack of translations of most quoted Sanskrit and other texts, incomplete bibliography with no information on place, press and date of publication of books and journals, - to name only a few). What is disquieting and even frustrating is that such inadequacies characterize CHM throughout.

CHM thus stands far short of a reliable research tool for students of Mithila. It is sad to have to render such a verdict considering that CHM represents the sum of a lifetime's effort. But even a magnum opus need not be an opus laudibile.