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Timeless Verses: A Modern-Day Reading of Vidyapati

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Abstract

This paper discusses Vidyapati as a poet through his maithil song 'Piya Mor Balak' and its scope in the present day. This not only raises awareness regarding the society about which he wrote, but it also helps contemplate his relevance in today's world, questioning the very basis of how much change has really occurred concerning women's issues.

India has been home to many intellectuals, thinkers, artists, and revolutionaries. In literature today, we recognize some of the greatest writers and poets who wrote in their native language. Their writings, mainly composed of songs and poetry, were understood in the cultural context within which they existed. All different cultures gave birth to many such dignified artists. Their profound understanding of society and its inhabitants was so acute that their applicability persists in many aspects of life. Vidyapati, being one among them, belongs to the Maithil culture and can be read through a modern lens, and it would be surprising to notice how relevant he is in the current scenario.

His most renowned work, which is also his most extensively studied composition, is his 'Love Songs'. His devotional compositions continue to captivate audiences. Additionally, his compositions have been transmitted as folk songs or regional melodies. Although his major works are composed in Sanskrit, he employs the Maithil language for his songs. Vidyapati took up the language spoken in Mithila as the medium of his popular song and gave it a literary expressiveness as sweet and entrancing as could be found only in Sanskrit (Jha, 2017:20). Many of these are sung at Maithil weddings. Nevertheless, it provides insight into his unique perspective on life in Mithila during that period, maintaining considerable relevance for

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contemporary women and paying due attention to its pleasure aspect. Vidyapati made that pleasure easy for everyone to enjoy and he chose topics for treatment in his songs that could appeal to the common men and women, including the lowest in society but not excluding the highest and the noblest. (Jha, 2017:20)

Keywords: Vidyapati, Maithli.

Introduction

Vidyapati, a Maithil poet of the 14th-15th century, is renowned for his lyrical compositions that delve into the depths of human emotion and the divine love between the god Krishna and his beloved Radha. Maithili, the language in which Vidyapati wrote, is one of the 22 official languages of India, with a rich literary tradition and a large speaking community (Roy, 2020:1).

Vidyapati's poetry often focused on themes of love, devotion, and human experience, with his Maithili songs serving as poignant expressions of these universal themes. He is credited with elevating the status of the 'people's language,' Maithili, by influencing the Maharaja of Darbhanga with the quality of his poetry (Roy, 2020:1). Vidyapati's work has been a source of inspiration for many, and his legacy continues to be celebrated and studied by scholars and enthusiasts alike. This paper aims to provide a translation and explanation of one of Vidyapati's Maithili songs, shedding light on the cultural and linguistic nuances that imbue his work and offer profound insights into the human condition.

For this, we are particularly concentrating on the song "Piya Mor Balak". The purpose of taking up this song is that it does not specifically deal with the gods. It is one of his least-recognized songs. Through this study, we must translate the song and delve into its literal and symbolic meaning. While doing so, we will also be looking at how it can be interpreted in a modern context. The poem discusses the inner turmoil of a young adult woman who has been married off to a child.

It is noteworthy that Vidyapati, commonly referred to by the epithet Maithili Kavi Kokil, was born in 1352. Given the prevalence of patriarchal structures during that historical period, the concept of a young adult female marrying a significantly younger male appears improbable. Nevertheless, considering the abundance of folksongs and traditions based on such unions, it can be inferred that, while not a widespread practice, such occurrences did transpire in certain instances. For example,

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astrological practices were extant during Vidyapati's era and likely exerted a more substantial influence on marital arrangements than in contemporary times. Consequently, these practices may have contributed to such unions. Widow remarriages, although infrequent, were not entirely absent even within that orthodox Hindu community. Furthermore, a woman deemed socially compromised before marriage could potentially find herself in such circumstances.

It could also be a case of sheer creativity by Vidyapati. Existing in a highly patriarchal world where women as young as fourteen to fifteen years were married off to much older men, for the sake of social, economic, and religious compatibility, even if it meant compromising physical, emotional, and intellectual aspects of the same, Vidyapati could have written this song, reimagining the relationship to explore how the power dynamics and emotional intricacies of the interaction shift in such contexts.

Another possible explanation for the inspiration behind this particular poem lies in its cultural context. Mithila takes pride in the fact that it is the only culture where Vishnu manifested himself in the form of a son-in-law, in the mighty form of Ram. Like all marriages in Mithila, Lord Ram was also subjected to mockery and playful humour. As the custom goes, during the wedding both Ram and Sita are said to have found themselves receiving gentle jabs from the Maithilanis (Sita's friends and relatives). Because in many versions of Ramayan Sita was older than Ram, this song could be a part of the same custom, popularly known as 'Gair'.

Lastly, the implied meaning may also be more metaphorical and symbolic. The young boy here might be an adult man with an immature mindset, short temper, and irresponsible tendencies, all of which torment the newly married woman, manifesting as an exaggeration in the poem.

This song, along with the majority of other songs have been passed down through the oral tradition. Vidyapati is said to have had a wonderful insight into a woman's heart and he depicted the secret emotions of a woman so very faithfully, realistically and feelingly that women found in them their portrayal. It was, therefore, the women who learnt these songs and transmitted them from mouth to mouth till someone put them down in a notebook. (Jha, 2017:44)

DISCUSSION

<p><i>“Piya mor balak, hum taruni ge; Kaun tap chklaun, bhelun Janani ge.”</i></p>	<p>“I have got a child for a lover, which penance did I fail at; that I did not become a wife but a mother?”</p>
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These lines form the chorus of the song and thus encapsulate the entire message of the song. Here, we can see the woman lamenting the fact that her husband is extremely young in age, and it's as if she has already become a mother. We see her dejection when she points out how she feels like a failure. In Mithila, as in numerous cultures, it is believed that a woman who has performed intense penance, akin to Parvati, is rewarded with a husband possessing qualities similar to Shiva: handsome, righteous, and devoted. Shiva as a husband holds great significance in Hinduism. His love for Sati caused him to go mad, miles with the burnt body of Sati in his arms. His devotion toward Parvati is also unmatched and hence, he is often held in great admiration, with women all over India observing fasts on holy days like those of Mahashivratri and Sawan, in hopes of finding a husband like him even in this day and age. Therefore, we can see how not getting a good husband is often viewed as a woman's fault. The philosophy behind victim blaming is being questioned.

In contemporary society, men who lack emotional maturity relative to their age continue to pose significant challenges, as their behaviour negatively impacts women. Similar to societal attitudes in the fourteenth century, modern society in the twenty-first century often attributes blame to women and their circumstances for entering into such relationships. Even if the song in question was intended as a satirical commentary, its relevance persists in the present-day context.

The lines above also hold evidence to the fact that the woman was unaware of who she was getting married to, before the wedding. In 1792, in her book 'A Vindication of the Rights of Women', when Mary Wollstonecraft said 'I do not wish women to have power over men; but to have power over themselves', this is what she

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was hinting towards. The fact that a woman is but a mere spectator in events as important as her marriage is ludicrous. (Wollstonecraft, 1792)

<p><i>“Piya lel kora main; challi bazaar, hatiya ke log puche; kela rup tohar, nahi mor devar; nahi chot bhai, bidhna likhal chal balam u hamar.”</i></p>	<p>“I lift him up and take him to the vegetable shop too. The people there ask me, who is he to you? I assure them that he is not my brother-in-law or my brother, but what destiny has given me in the form of a lover.”</p>
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Here, Vidyapati continues to shed light on the plight of this woman, conveying how this incompatible age gap is a matter of embarrassment and shame for her. According to her, even at the vegetable bazaar, her relationship with her husband is questionable. If we were to study this more symbolically, it may be that the husband's lack of patience and fiery temper becomes a topic of discussion and mockery among the vegetable sellers. The above lines hence, could be making use of exaggeration and hyperbole; to state how embarrassed the woman is of her childish husband. This absence of emotional stability and indignity of actions might be triggering dismay and hostility from sellers, manifesting into taunts that they throw towards the woman. Even today, women often find themselves victims of blame and mockery for the immature ways of their husbands. It is almost as if people believe that the woman is not a wife but a mother who needs to change the wild ways of the man, making him gentler and more civilized. Today, feminists are questioning such beliefs, compelling women to give up this societal pressure of mothering the men in their lives.

In 2016, Jennifer Lopez put forward a song illuminating this very idea through her song 'Ain't Your Mama'. Debuting at number 92 on U.S. Billboard Hot 100, its popularity among the ladies remains apparent and concerning.

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*“Pahiral sakhi ek dakshin chir
Piya ke dekhath bhel dhagad sharir,
Baat re batohiya ke, toh mor bhai
Hamaro Babaji ke kahab bujhayi.”*

“I wore a saree from south one day,
But the moment I looked at my
husband, my body was consumed by
flames.

oh, dear traveller! You are like my
cousin, travelling to my home,
Please tell my father of what I
proclaim.”

The aforementioned lines indicate the absence of physical gratification experienced by the woman within the marital relationship. The husband, having not yet reached puberty, is unable to fulfil her physical needs. Consequently, when she adorns herself and observes her spouse, the reality instigates both humiliation and anger, causing her to be engulfed with rage that burns her like fire. With zero awareness about the sexual needs of women at the time of Vidyapati, this dissatisfaction on the woman's part is not surprising. In the lines indicate Vidyapati's awareness of female sexuality and the inadequacy of men in providing physical satisfaction to their female partners.

Even today, though the woman and her needs are comparatively more well known, not many men pay due attention to it. Women who hope for sexual satisfaction from their partners are disappointed when men continue to disdain their needs and wants in a relationship.

In her work named 'The Feminine Mystique', Betty Friedan iterates the following lines,

“Instead of fulfilling the promise of infinite orgasmic bliss, sex in America of the feminine mystique is becoming a strangely joyless national compulsion, if not a contemptuous mockery.” (Friedan, 1963)

Friedan, through the above lines, contemplates the idea of marriage being sold as a mode of satisfaction to women, until they realize that sex has turned more into a chore than a way of finding pleasure. This resonates closely with Vidyapati's idea of sex as an unfulfilling experience for women in marriage.

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“ Bechata bard gola kitna dhenu gaye, Dudh piya ke posta jamai. Nahi mor bard gola, Nahi dhenu gaye, Kaun jugut sakhi posab jamai.”	“Ask him to give his money and buy a cow to be milked, And on its milk, he shall rear his son-in-law. I don't have any money and neither do I own a cow to milch, How shall I bring up this boy who is his son-by-law.”
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In this context, the woman asserts that her father should take on the responsibility of purchasing a cow that produces milk and provide that milk to his son-in-law to help him mature into a man. Considering the circumstances in Mithila during that period, a young woman had no means to acquire a cow; thus, it was reasonably expected for her to seek support from her father regarding this issue. However, a careful analysis of Vidyapati's work indicates that the woman might be critiquing her father's choice to arrange her marriage to someone who displays childish and easily angered traits, qualities that are inappropriate for someone of his age.

The above lines by Vidyapati not only highlight the relevance of the plight of women in modern society but also the need to question the patriarchal authorities who make such distasteful decisions. It is a well-known fact that even in the twenty-first century patriarchy is more than alive. A lot of women do not have the right to marry a man they love, and under parental pressure, they often find themselves married to strangers. These marriages are nothing less than a gamble, which can take a bad turn. According to Vidyapati, fathers, brothers, and husbands should not be given the privilege of having unquestioned authority. In particular, at times like these, they must be called out and held responsible.

John Stuart Mill, along with his wife Harriet Mill, wrote an essay called 'Subjection of Women', wherein he discussed similar ideas. Written in 1869, he advocated for a model of marriage where both partners have equal rights and responsibilities, emphasizing that a true partnership requires shared decision-making and the freedom for both individuals to pursue their aspirations. (Mill, 1869) Mill's progressive views were groundbreaking for his time and remain influential in feminist

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thought. He not only advocated freedom for the daughters from their father's patriarchal thoughts but for the mothers who, when given a place in making decisions, would create a lot of difference.

“Banahi Vidyapati, sunahu brijnari Dhayraj dharahu, milat murari.”	“Vidyapati thus consoles the women of brij, Hold your patience and you shall be redeemed in the tranquillity, you'll find him Krishna the lord supreme.”
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Vidyapati ends the song by asking the women to remain patient. He assures them that in this way, they shall find Krishna, the supreme Lord. Vidyapati here gives a devotional touch to the poem, thus emphasizing the fact that meeting the lord is the ultimate goal of life, and if one remains patient and meditates upon the lord, they will find divine strength that shall guide them.

In the contemporary context, Vidyapati continues to inspire women to contemplate the divine, encouraging them to view their respective religions not as a weakness but as a source of strength. In this instance, he refrains from mentioning Ram or Shiva, instead invoking the presence of Krishna. Krishna is portrayed as the confidant of Draupadi, who saved her from humiliation, urged her not to forget, and promised her vengeance. He is also depicted as the one who motivated Arjuna to engage in warfare, even against his own family members, to secure justice for Draupadi. Furthermore, Krishna is presented as the figure who assisted Shrikhandini (Amba) in seeking retribution from Bhishma in her current life. He is also described as having married more than sixteen thousand women to restore their dignity. Thus, Vidyapati exhorts women to believe that divine power enhances a woman's strength.

A popular work that deals with the spiritual journey of women would be 'Eat, Pray and Love' by Elizabeth Gilbert, written in 2006. A self-help book and a memoir combined in one, it addresses the author's journey toward healing. Pema Chodoron's 'When Things Fall Apart' written in 2000 and Marrienne Williamson's 'The Age of Miracles: Embracing the New Midlife' written in 2008, have aligned thematic interests.

Conclusion

The following lines from the text called 'Vidyapati' by Raghunath Jha, sheds light on a lesser-known facet of Vidyapati's personality. He certainly can be called a man who was way ahead of his time. Raghunath Jha points out,

"Vidyapati was, indeed, very progressive in his views and considering the age in which he lived we would call these views almost modern. He was a staunch protagonist of women's education. In cultured families, girls' education received proper attention during that age and the ladies of the Oinabara Kings' household were learned. Shiva Singha's wife, Lakhima, Chandeshwara's wife of the same name, and Vidyapati's daughter-in-law, Chandrakala, were poetesses of repute. Vidyapati advocated this on a large scale and he composed Puruṣaparīkṣā with the avowed purpose of providing a text-book "for the delectation of those ladies of the city who display a taste for the mirthful arts of the god of love". Imparting sex education to ladies was one of the purposes of his love lyrics. In one of his songs, Vidyapati says that he wants to teach the qualities of a Ngarī, and a 'Ngarī', though meaning etymologically a lady of the city, as Grierson translates it, has been used in Sanskrit literature, as also by Vidyapati, to connote a lady who is cultured in the art of love-making." (Jha, 2017:21)

When read with this awareness, the song gains more social and political momentum.

'Piya Mor Balak' from being a maithil song that is sung at weddings in order to tease the newlyweds, majorly taking jabs at the groom, thus becomes more serious and thought-provoking. This is even more true when it is evaluated in the modern context. Its lines resonate with the age-old battle that women have fought in terms of their ill-fated marriages with grown-up men who have no intellectual or emotional maturity. Be it their short temper or their disinterest in female sexuality, men more often than not, end up disappointing women. When the song is read in this light, it becomes obvious that women have seldom gained anything in marriages. Yet, they are expected to mother these grown men who are so unappreciative of their efforts. Not only are these women victims of their child-like emotions and unsurmountable ego but they are also sexually unsatisfied. This feeling of dissatisfaction is also prevalent among women in the twenty-first century. A survey conducted by MsCheif reveals that the pleasure gap between genders is significant, with over eighty-one percent of women expressing dissatisfaction with the men in their lives.

In the latter part of the song, Vidyapati adopts a feminist perspective, calling

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for accountability from the patriarchs who oversee marriage decisions without considering women's needs. A recent study by WeddingWire India indicates that approximately forty-four percent of Indians still engage in arranged marriages, with women having less freedom compared to men, making the situation particularly challenging for them. Therefore, if such marriages end in failure, who should be held responsible?

Through the song, Vidyapati highlights the importance of moving beyond the notion that marriages are solely based on the compatibility of caste, religion, and social status among families. The primary objective of a marriage should be to establish a partnership rather than a sense of ownership. Most crucially, marriage should be viewed as a journey, one in which the woman evolves, learns, and empowers herself alongside the man. Even in the current day scenario, people are divorced from such ideologies. With so many years of feminism, the impact of it on the mindset of common people continues to be inadequate.

Amid everything, Vidyapati encourages women to uphold their spirituality. She should meditate on the divine, and if ultimately everyone abandons her, the supreme lord will be her refuge. Just as one needs nourishment to engage in battle, anyone embarking on an intellectual or emotional struggle—especially one that challenges long-established customs and traditions in her quest for self-empowerment and women's rights—will find that spirituality serves as the essential fuel for her spirit. This also ensures that she remains focused on her ultimate aspiration, which is not marriage, but the pursuit of the divine.

The above discussion helps to bring awareness regarding feminism in India. Many think that feminist thought came to India much later than the West. But reading Vidyapati is a reminder that feminist thought existed in the country way earlier. Many of the ideas that Vidyapati has discussed in this song can be found in the feminist essays of Mary Wollstonecraft, Simone De Beauvoir, J.S Mill, Betty Friedman, Judith Butler so on and so forth. This makes evident, the fact that Vidyapati was but an early proponent of feminist thought in India.

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