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### Speak Up

#### BANĀRSĪDĀS – A 17<sup>TH</sup> CENTURY AUTHOR OF THE FIRST INDIAN AUTOBIOGRAPHY

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It is well understood that over the many centuries Jains were prolific writers. Their compositions include rich and vast corpus of sacred texts and scriptures, their commentaries, a great variety of philosophical texts and also textual works included in the Jain Universal History. Over the centuries Jain authors also composed *prabandhas* – biographies, which encompassed not only the life stories of Jinas and other *śalākāpuruṣas* (illustrious men) but also the ones of the famous monks, lay people – patrons, kings and merchants, and also included non-Jains. However, it is not common knowledge, that the author of the first medieval Indian autobiography was a Jain layman – Banārsīdās.

Banārsīdās was born in 1587 in the city of Jaunpur – a center of commerce and industry. His family belonged to Śrīmālī Jains, and his father was a jewelry and textiles trader. He was expected to follow his father's profession, but he wasn't successful in this field. After all, he was more of a poet than businessman. After his turbulent youth filled in with romance and learning, he turned to be a pious layman worshipping Jinas, performing rituals and restricting his diet. With time, he gradually underwent a spiritual change, and he became one of the leaders of Adhyātma – the reform movement focused on inner transformation and rejection of rituals, which arose in a strong opposition to the *bhaṭṭārakas* and their deviant lifestyle including the worldly involvement, rituals, and royal lifestyle – so different from the normative conduct of a Digambara monk.

In 1636, he composed a text expounding on the *guṇasthāna* doctrine, titled *Samayasāranāṭak*. It was a commentary/rendering on Kundakunda's *Samayasāra*, based



also on a commentary of Amṛtacandra's *Samayasāra Kalaśa*. Apart from it, Banārsīdās also authored several poetic texts and songs which were compiled into *Banārsī Vilās* in 1644 shortly after his death by his friend Jagīvanrām.

The interesting fact is, that his poems, songs and the Jain philosophical *Samayasāranāṭak* were incorporated, alongside with the texts of other traditions (Nāths, Sants, followers of Kṛṣṇa) in Dādūpanthī manuscripts (Dādūpanth was a *bhakti* movement founded by Dādū Dayāl in 16<sup>th</sup>/17<sup>th</sup>-century Rajasthan) starting from the turn of the eighteenth century.

Banārsīdās composed his autobiography in Agra in 1641, at the age of 55, which marks the half of a life span, hence the title – *Ardhakathānak* (*Half a Story*). Ironically, he died a couple of years later in 1643. The poem was written in the Braj dialect of Hindi in 675 stanzas. After the introductory section composed in the first person, the narrative is switched into the third person and describes not only the author's successes, but also his failures and losses as a merchant, his lack of skills, and carelessness. Banārsīdās not only depicts his many adventures (e.g. being falsely accused of robbery), but also his temporary departure from the Jain faith, devotion to Siva, then his return to Jainism and joining the Adhyātma movement. He relates all his ups and downs, internal changes, crises and conflicts with honesty and a specific sense of humor – a reader can find plenty of self-mockery and irony in the poem. He even ridicules his parents going on a pilgrimage to Sati Aut and being robbed on the way.

Although criticized by some scholars for the simplicity and being written in a hurry, the style of the poem is characterized by internal and end rhymes, alliterations, repetitions of sounds and words, and switching between different metres (e.g. 15-*mātra caupāī, dohā*) to change a narrative rhythm. Thus, proving high poetic and language skills of the author.

It is worth noting, that the poem is not only an autobiography but also a rich source of a social history of Banārsīdās time as well – Agra in the 17<sup>th</sup> century was the capital of the Mughal empire and an important urban and commercial center of North India. Therefore,



*Ardhakathānak* is a source of information about medieval India with its social, cultural and ethical values and vivid description of middle-class lifestyle – daily life, work related activities and social relations. It also sheds the light on how Jains conducted business. Moreover, *Banārsīdās* gives an insight onto religious life and values of Jain laity by depicting ceremonies, pilgrimages and vows.

Overall, with its translations into English and French, *Banārsīdās*' autobiography proved to be popular as it does not only give a rare insight into the life of a Jain layman described with all honesty, but also it is a treasure of information about India in the 17<sup>th</sup> century.

