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Speak Up

BANĀRASĪDĀSA: AN OVERLOOKED FIGURE IN INDIAN HISTORY (IN THE LIGHT OF ARDHAKATHĀNAKA)

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Modern literary scholars universally recognize that the history of Hindi literature remains incomplete and lacking without the exploration and reflection on Jain literary contributions. Jain authors have played an even more significant role in shaping the devotional era's literature. The spiritual essence of that age was strengthened with remarkable determination and grace by these authors. Their original perspectives further enriched it profoundly—an enduring legacy that will be cherished for generations. Banārasīdāsa (1586-1643 CE), a true torchbearer of literary heritage, illuminated Hindi literature with his brilliance, offering a fresh perspective that enriched its depth and diversity.

Banārasīdāsa emerges not only as a leading poet of his time but as a central figure in the entire Hindi Jain literary tradition. Scholars consistently praise the depth of his learning and the strength of his poetic expression. In much the same way that Sant Tulasīdāsa articulated the ideals of Vaishnavism with clarity and scholarship—guiding society toward moral upliftment and uplifting the stream of Saguna Bhakti—Banārasīdāsa holds a comparably eminent place in the landscape of Hindi literature.

Banārasīdāsa is well known for the autobiography, he wrote in 1641 CE, at the age of 55. He gave the title “*Ardhakathānaka*” (translated as ‘Half a Story’), because the ideal life span is considered to be one hundred and ten years within the Jain tradition.

*barasa ek sau dasa, paramita mānuṣa āu |
solahase arṭṭānavai, samai bīca yaha bhāu ||*



He wrote in the conclusion of his text that “the best part is about to come”

*āgai ju kachu hoigī aura | taisī samujhainge tisa thaura ||
bartamāna nara-āu bakhāna | varasa eka so dasa paravāna ||*

But this part was indeed very short because he died only two years after having finished his work. Written in the Brajabhāṣā dialect, the *Ardhakathānaka* is considered to be the first autobiography written in Hindi and more largely in any Indian language.

Banārasīdāsa is the author of several well-respected works on Jainism, but the *Ardhakathānaka* is unique because of its being, arguably, the ‘first autobiography in the Indian tradition’.

Ardhakathānaka: Contexts of History, Autobiography, and Hagiography

In contrast to numerous ancient and medieval writers whose lives are obscured by legend and whose exact dates remain subjects of scholarly debate, the later medieval period introduced a noticeable change. Authors began to record precise dates and personal details within their works, reflecting an emerging concern for historical specificity and self-documentation. *Ardhakathānaka* is a striking example of this development, containing an exceptional number of chronological references—many noted with impressive exactness, down to the month and even the day.

*chatrapati jahāñgīra dillīsa | kīno rāja barasa bāīsa ||
kāsamīre māraga bīca | āvata huī acānaka mīca ||

māsi cāri antara paravāna | āyau sāhijihān sulatāna ||
baiñhayom takahata chatra sira tāni | cahū cakkamāīm pherī āna ||*

The language of Ardhakathānaka

The poet refers to the language of *Ardhakathānaka* as "Madhyadeśa kī boli" (the language from Madhyadeśa)

*madhyadesakī volī boli | garbita vāta kahom hiā kholi ||
bhākhom pūrava-dasā-caritra | khunahu kāna dhari mere mitra ||*

Here, *boli* refers to the spoken language of that time, rather than a formal literary language. Banārsidāsa, an esteemed poet, composed his other works in a more polished literary style.



However, he chose to write this autobiography in a simple, unembellished manner, making it easily accessible to the common people.

Conclusion

Ardhakathānaka is an important resource for scholars working in diverse fields such as Indian history, culture, literature, and linguistics. Its layered narrative and linguistic sophistication offer valuable insights for anyone examining the development of literary forms and cultural expression in medieval India.

Thus, *Ardhakathānaka* stands as the earliest known autobiography in Indian literature, offering readers a comprehensive blend of elements—be it literary expression, artistic nuance, chronological detail, or poetic insight. Through this remarkable work, Banārasīdāsa made a lasting and meaningful contribution to the growth of Hindi literature.

