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## Itihāsottama: A Source Text Of Cultural Amalgamation

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### ABSTRACT

The life of Indians was documented in Sanskrit Literature. The dynamic culture of society was started from the Vedic periods. After that, Smārta literature or Dharmaśāstra flourished as the code of conduct. Here a particular text of this tradition named 'Viṣṇu Smṛti' is going to be discussed. The text seems by the name anyhow related to Dharmaśāstra. Hence, the content of the text has proved the presenter wrong. The unique feature of the text is the orientation of Bhakti where Kṛṣṇa is the supreme Godhead. Even the other diverse dogmas (e.g. Śaiva, Śākta, Pāśupata, Bauddha) and popular belief systems are propounded through the code of conduct. Dealing with diverse topics it is considered not only a law text but also a kind of a source-book of social history which throws light on Indian culture, ethics and philosophical tradition. Even the existence of Viṣṇu Smṛti proves that undeniable primacy and priority of Manu was not the end. It is a mixed composition of poetry and prose in 100 chapters around 7th century of Kashmir. It is really not possible to analyse the whole life as mentioned in the Smṛti in a short paper. Instead, this paper is an attempt to discuss some aspects of dharma and religious life as described in the Viṣṇu Smṛti.

### 1.0 Introduction

The term *Itihāsa*, means 'historical event' or past event. The *Mahābhārata* is the best specimen of that which declares, 'this is the best of the *Itihāsas*'. Here a particular unpublished text named '*Itihāsottama*' is going to be discussed, which belongs to the classical Indian narrative tradition. The text seems by the name anyhow related to *Itihāsa*. The philosophy of the content of the text has proved the present writer wrong. It is based on *Bhakti*. 'The critical edition of the *Itihāsottama*' has done for the dissertation of the present writer on the basis of a comparative study of five

manuscripts. It is a poetry composition in 25 chapters. It is mentioned in 16<sup>th</sup> century text, *Haribhaktivilāsa*, by Sanātana Goswāmi. The unique feature of the *Itihāssottama* is that, it always resorts to examples while elucidating any concept or idea for the sake of educating the common mass. The text says Kṛṣṇa is the supreme Godhead. Here *Bhakti* and other diverse dogmas and popular belief systems has propounded through narratives from *Mahābhārata*, *Purāṇa* etc. This text is the result of that point of time when the *Pāñcarātra* and the Bhāgavata cults of *Vaiṣṇavism* got amalgamated. *Bhakti mārga* enables human beings to devote their entire being in an unselfish and unconditional way to God (in personal form), which is not difficult for the common man to pursue. *Itihāssottama* deals with diverse topics so it is considered not only a selection of stories but also a kind of a source-book of social history which throws light on Indian philosophy, culture, ethics and Bhakti tradition etc.

The present anthology talks about selections of *Ākhyānas* from *Itihāsa* and the major *Purāṇas*, which comprises tales, popular stories, myths etc. In the past Indian intellectual tradition was in oral form. They used to memorize not only Vedas but also *Itihāsa* and *Purāṇa*. But during the period of transition, due to large number of texts they were changed in to written tradition. In this way, narrative literature has flourished in the past. Both the Epics and *Purāṇas* are picturesque description of ancient Indian culture and civilization, the political and social life, and the philosophy and thought. They cover remarkably a wide range of Sanskrit literature developed through the growth of centuries and provide diversified interesting characters. Indigenous authorities firmly believe in the historicity of these the *Rāmāyaṇa*, the *Mahābhārata*, the *Purāṇas*. In the *Mahābhārata* itself we can find the definition of *Itihāsa*. *Mahābhārata* uses the term *itihāssottama* to define the nature of it. Our text may well be indebted to this verse for its title. It is neither uncommon nor surprising for an author to have borrowed the title of his work from a verse of a canonical text. Most of the *Purāṇas* in their present forms, including the chronologically older ones, betray strong sectarian biases and formidable influence of Bhakti traditions. While the *Mahābhārata* does show its familiarity with the tenets of Bhakti and the dogmas of Vaiṣṇava sect, these religious issues are never the primary concern, and in all probability, later addition to the text.

The language of *itihāssottama* is direct, simple and grand. Here a particular unpublished text named '*Itihāssottama*' is going to be discussed, which belongs to the classical Indian narrative tradition. The text seems by the name anyhow related to *Itihāsa*. The philosophy of the content of the text has proved the present writer wrong. This paper is the result of that idea. Text is based on *Bhakti*. 'The critical edition of the *Itihāssottama*' has done for the dissertation of the present writer on the basis of a comparative study of five manuscripts.

## 2.0 Research Question

The Main research question of this paper is that how the *Itihāssottama* has become the source of cultural amalgamations? It is really not possible to analyse culture as mentioned in the

Itihāsottama in a short paper. Instead, this paper is an attempt to discuss some aspects of cultural amalgamation as described in the text. Specially Itihāsottama is compilations of stories from itihasa and purana But it shows its familiarity with the tenets of Bhakti and the dogmas of Vaiṣṇava sect.

### 3.0 Research Methods

1. collecting data from five chapters of critical edited text Itihāsottamai.
2. comparative study of the discussed topic from all the variant of the Manuscript.
3. descriptive analysis of the chapters

Although overall cultural study is not largely explained in this paper but The methodology section includes data collections from five chapters of five different Manuscripts described by New Catalogus Catalogorum which is an extension of Aufrecht's Catalogus Catalogorum. Five were used here for M.phil. research. Name of the Manuscripts were given on the first letter of the script has used in the MSS.(e.g. D>Devnagari & M>Malayalam)

The details of manuscript are as followsii:

Ms D1, Repository: Adyar, Devanāgarī script, Good and well-conserved, complete.

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Ms M2, Repository: Kerala University Kariavattom, old Malayalam, worm-eaten, incompleteiii.

### 4.0 Data Collection

Because the author is anonymous so identifying the place of origin of a text is difficult. The same applies to Itihāsottama. The maximum number of Manuscripts are towards a South Indian origin. The text refers often to places of north India, e.g., Indraprastha, Kurukhetra etc., and, on the whole, has a pan-Indian character, in harmony with almost all our canonical texts. It is most unfortunate that the identity of the author of the text could not be determined. If any argument with respect to the place of origin of Itihāsottama is entirely based on conjecture and speculation, then it is all the more difficult and virtually impossible to pass any judgement on the date of the text, due to the lack of any conclusive evidence or clue. Approximately the date would be before 11th century because this text was mentioned in Nāmamālikā (11th century )& Haribhakti Vilāsa(16th century). Not a single commentary has been discovered yet.

### 5.0 Data Analysis, Result and Discussion

**5.1 Structure of the text:** It is a poetry composition in 25 chapters. There are 488 verses in all. Most of the verses are in *Anuṣṭubh* meters except the last four lines (two *ślokas*) of each chapter, which have adopted a different *chanda* from the rest of the chapter. It discusses a number of topics which are very popular in *Mahābhārata* and *Purāṇas*, through a master-disciple-dialogue

(guruśiṣyasambhāṣaṇam) between the saint Bhṛṅgu and Śaunaka an Upaniṣadic mode of teaching. It is mentioned in the text, *Haribhaktivilāsa*, written by Sri Gopala Bhatta. It is available till now. Sanātana Goswāmi 15<sup>th</sup> century has written commentary on it. The unique feature of the *Itihāsottama* is that, it always resorts to examples while elucidating any concept or idea for the sake of educating the common mass. The text says Kṛṣṇa is the supreme Godhead. Here *Bhakti* and other diverse dogmas and popular belief systems has propounded through narratives from *Mahābhārata*, *Puṣṭāṅga* etc. This text is the result of that point of time when the *Pāñcarātra* and the Bhāgavata cults of *Vaiṣṇavism* got amalgamated. *Bhakti mārṅa* enables human beings to devote their entire being in an unselfish and unconditional way to God (in personal form), which is not difficult for the common man to pursue. *Itihāsottama* deals with diverse topics so it is considered not only a selection of stories but also a kind of a source-book of social history which throws light on Indian philosophy, culture, ethics and Bhakti tradition etc.

### 5.2 Content of the text: (Aṣṭādaśapurāṇasaṅkṣepa/Epitome of 18 Purāṇas)

The first chapter comprises of (71) verses which offers salutation to the Jagannātha/Nārāyaṇa, The supreme being of the universe, the all-pervading. The author compares the *Itihāsōttama* with the 18 *Purāṇas* as a substitute of themselves. Śaunaka, though being trained in different studies, asked the perfect Karma or action that gives the eternal happiness, the meaning of *nīśreyasa*, a state of happiness not complete and perennial but transient and short-lived. Śaunaka gets to know on two *Vaidika Karmas*, *pravṛtti* and *nivṛtti* or *phalasaṃnyāsa* in doing *karma* where *nivṛtti* leads the eternal happiness, the state of equilibrium, respectively. *Yamas* and *niyamas* are the gate of that way which is called *Aṣṭāṅgāni* of Yoga. It further emphasizes on concept of the *Niṣkāmkarma*, the importance of restraint senses through the Yoga in doing Karma, the duty-bound-actions and the role of a competent master.

### 5.3 (Gautamśiṣyasaṃvāda/Conversation of Gautama and Disciples)

The second chapter in 125verses throws light on the Indian wisdom and morality of relation between a Guru and his disciples. It is made clearer by a story of how *sumati kapila* and other *Śiṣyas* after a lot of effort succeed high state by worshipping and serving their *guru*, sage *Gautama*. This text also teaches us how to attain supreme bliss through the practice of *yama*, *niyama*, *Yoga* and *Bhakti*. Kṛṣṇa is the supreme Godhead according to this text and it is His glory that the text upholds through its various narratives and eulogies.

*Itihāsottama* encompasses both the narrative and the spiritual, paradigms yielded respectively by the *Mahābhārata* and the *Bhāgavata*. The influence of the *Mahābhārata* in the history of Indian culture and civilization can hardly be exaggerated. There is hardly any poet, aesthician or philosopher who was not influenced by the text. With its fourfold function in resolving the four *vargas* (aspects) of human life, *dharma*, *artha*, *kāma* and *mokṣa*, it has a continuous appeal and relevance. It speaks in vibrant terms, among other issues, of education, especially guru śiṣya relationship, from the epic we can gather that the ashramas were the main centres of learning,

though many of the scholars were patronized by royal courts, and they sometimes abandoned the hermitages at the behest of their patronized. Example of ideal disciples abound in the epic, the most famous of them being āruṇi utanka and Arjuna. These texts contain prescriptions and solutions for almost all problems in human life, across time and space. Custodians of Indian wisdom had classified human misery into three kinds *Ādhibhautika* (Biogenic Misery e.g. injury or pain by animals) *Ādhidaivika* (Divine Misery e.g. caused by seasonal acrocity, earthquake) *Ādhyātmika* (personal Misery) and propounded ways of overcoming them, which can be broadly divided into the *Karma mārga* and the *Jñāna mārga*. *Karma* (action) is of two types, *pravṛtti* and *nivṛtti*, depending on the fact whether it is motivated by desire and instinct or motivated by knowledge. However, the *Jñāna mārga* is a difficult one for the common man to pursue, especially because of its emphasis on the realization of the Self as the *nirguṇa Brahman*, a concept hard to grasp. Therefore we find the rise of the *Bhakti mārga* which enables human beings to devote their entire being in an unselfish and unconditional way to God (in personal form), thereby relinquishing all desires, worries and worldly attachments. Though the *Bhakti mārga* is apparently different from the *Jñāna mārga*, there is no innate difference between the two at the end of the day, because both lead to the same goal of *niśreyasa*. *Itihāsottama* may be considered as a kind of a source-book of social history which throws light on Indian mythology, culture, ethics etc. While *puruṣārthās* are four (*dharma*, *Artha*, *Kāma*, *Mokṣa*), *Itihāsottama* deals primarily with only two of them *dharma* and *mokṣa*.

#### 5.4 (Vikukṣipulastyasāhṁvāda/Conversation of Vikukṣi and Pulastya)

Both of these two chapters carry 210 verses, the story of Vikukṣi to mention how even the sinner is saved. This narrative is drawn from various sources like the *Mahābhārata* etc. Text reiterates the story of the hunter (Vyādha) and Death (Yama) from the *Anuśāsanaparvan* of the *Mahābhārata*; such examples can be multiplied. The unique feature of the *Itihāsottama* and other similar text is that they always resort to examples while elucidating any concept or idea for the sake of educating the common mass. Such a method makes abstruse theories and moral precepts easy to understand and more pragmatic. This is the reason why such texts have wide currency among all sections of the society. The narratives in these works being rich, entertaining, practical, with a deep understanding of the world order, and bearing a lofty thought, invariably cut deeply through our minds.

#### 5.5 Indraśākalaśāhṁvāda (Conversation of Indra and Śākala)

In this chapter, Śaunaka asked a next question “What is the best Dharma”. Bhṛgu proclaims Ahimsa or non-violence as the best Dharma illustrates through the story of a conversation between Indra and Śākala, a *brāhmaṇa* from Indraprastha. The *Itihāsottama* ordain *Ahiṁsā* e.g. *ahiṁsā paramo dharma*. *Dayā*, *Dāna*, *Tapa*, *Śama*, *Dama*, *Asteya*, all of which are reflected in the same ideas depicted in *Purāṇas*. This is propounded also by the early Āchāryas of the later period e.g. Rāmānuja, Vallabha Madhva etc. Here we notice a synthesis of the doctrines of *Karma*, *Bhakti*, *Jñāna*, *Yoga* etc. along with other diverse dogmas and popular belief systems. Related to

and contemporaneous with many *Puṛāṇas*, there was also a distinct body of Vaiṣṇava canonical texts, known as the *Pāñcarātras*. Taking much of their material from the Puṛāṇic Vaiṣṇava tradition, these texts glorify the primarily non-Vedic deity Nārāyaṇa, identified with Viṣṇu, and prescribe sectarian devotion and worship with respect to him. Although heretical in its initial stages, the *Pāñcarātra* system gradually assimilated the Vedic and quasi-Vedic doctrines, e.g., Sāṃkhya, Yoga Vedānta etc, and therefore was found authentic by later authorities like Yāmuna and others. There was apparently no difficulty in identifying the *Pāñcarātra-Puṛāṇa* tenets as having had a Vedic origin. Historians are of the opinion that the *Pāñcarātra* and the Bhāgavata cults got amalgamated at a certain point of time, thereby announcing a syncretism between Nārāyaṇa, Viṣṇu and Vāsudeva-Kṛṣṇa. Specially in this context text gives. May be this amalgam was propelled by an impetus to checkmate the surge of heretical creeds like Buddhist-Jaina-Cārvākas. Knowledge means effort but Bhakti is effortless and spontaneous. One may easily be a bhakta without rearing the Vedas. It is clear from the line of Itihāsottama that even a dog eater who struggles to do it cannot commit so many sins that they cannot be purified by the chanting the holy name of Viṣṇu. Haribhakti Vilasa used this as a source text. Itihāsottama says “Śvādopi na hi śaknoti kartuṃ pāpāni yatnataḥ| tāvantī yāvatī śaktirviṣṇornāmnośubhakṣaye”. To spread the glory of the utterance of the holy name It gives stress on Nāmasaṃkīrtana which is mentioned in Haribhaktivilasa also.

Svapopi nāmasmṛtirādi puṃsaḥ kṣayaṃ karotyāhita pāparāśeḥ| prayatnataḥ kiṃ punarādi puṃsaḥ prakīrtite nāmni janārdanasya

**5.6 Origin of the text:** Because the author is anonymous so identifying the place of origin of a traditional Indian text is difficult. The same applies to *Itihāsottama*. The maximum number of Manuscripts are from south Indian origin. Some of the evidences are towards a South Indian origin. The text refers often to places of north India, e.g., Indraprastha, Kurukhetra etc., and, on the whole, has a pan-Indian character, in harmony with almost all our canonical texts.

**5.7 Date of the text:** If any argument with respect to the place of origin of *Itihāsottama* is entirely based on conjecture and speculation, then it is all the more difficult and virtually impossible to pass any judgement on the date of the text, due to the lack of any conclusive evidence or clue. *Itihāsottama* is mentioned in a text called *Nāmamālikā*, traditionally attributed to *Bhoja*, a 16<sup>th</sup> century manuscript of which survives in the archives of the Royal Asiatic Society of Bengal. If the text referred to in the *Nāmamālikā* is the same as the one which we are concerned with, then it can be assumed to have existed at least before the 16<sup>th</sup> century. Besides, if *Bhoja*, the author of *Nāmamālikā* is identical with the king who ruled Malwa around 11<sup>th</sup> century, then we may go a step further and infer an even earlier date for our text. But such a conclusion is not completely free from risk. There is, however, a possibility that the text of *Itihāsottama* which was known to *Bhoja*, was in the form of oral narrative, and the written text arises at a later date. *Itihāsottama*

is also mentioned in yet another 15<sup>th</sup> century text, *Haribhaktivilāsa*, by Gopala Bhatta also which is Smṛti for the Vaiṣṇavas published in 5 vols.

**5.8 Author of the text:** It is most unfortunate that the identity of the author could not be determined.

**5.9 Debate regarding the title:** A confusion regarding the title of the work seems to have ensued at the very outset of modern scholarship regarding *Itihāṣottama*. W. Taylor, Aufrecht and A.B. Keith shared their own view regarding this text.

**5.10 Different *Itihāṣottamas*:** *New Catalogus Catalogorum* (A complete and up-to-date Alphabetical register of Sanskrit and Allied works and authors) which is an extension of Aufrecht's *Catalogus Catalogorum* refers eleven manuscripts of this text. Four Manuscripts are available in Microfilm at IGNCA. This edition is based on five manuscripts.

The details of manuscript are as follows: Ms D1, from Adyar, Devanāgarī script, Good and well-conserved, complete

The beginning: *॥Śrīḥ॥itihāṣottamaḥ॥nirvighnamastu॥Śrīmate rāmānujāya namaḥ Śrī vedavyāsaāya namaḥ॥hariḥ om॥praṇipatyā jagannātham carācaragurum hariṇ itihāṣottamam puṇyam pravakṣāmi yathātatham*

The colophon: *Iti itihāṣottame citramālopaḥkhyānam nāma pañcaviṃśodhyāya॥ ॥Śrīkṛṣṇāya namaḥ॥Śrīkṛṣṇārpaṇamastu॥ hariḥ om॥ Śrīmate rāmānujāya namaḥ Śrīmate kratunāthamahāgurave namaḥ*

It is known from the colophonic remarks that the scribe himself was a *Viṣṇu bhakta* and he mentioned his guru's name as *Kratunātha*. The scribe belonged to the *Rāmānuja* school of *Vaiṣṇavism* which is cleared from the colophon remark. It begins with a short eulogy of Viṣṇu. Collations of the manuscript were kindly supplied by *Thiruvēnkaṭācārya* who had collated on 25<sup>th</sup> September 1915. It is assumed the correction also has been done by him because in which ink he signed with date, same ink was used for correction of the text of this manuscript. The table of contents is as follows: 1<sup>st</sup> chapter सात्तिकादीनां विभागः, यमनियमलक्षणम्, 2<sup>nd</sup> chapter गुरुप्रशंसा, गौतमशिष्यसंवादः, 3<sup>rd</sup> chapter विष्णुभक्तलक्षणम्, विकुक्षिपुलस्त्यसंवादः, 4<sup>th</sup> chapter विकुक्षिपुलस्त्यसंवादः, 5<sup>th</sup> chapter प्राणिहिंसानिषेधः, इन्द्रशाकलसंवादः Remaining chapters are also given. Ms D2, Repository: Mysore Oriental Research Institute, Devanagari script, not look very old, good in condition, not complete, colophon absent.

The beginning: *Śrīgaṇeśāyanamaḥ॥ Śrīgurubhyonamaḥ॥ Śrīsarasvatyainamaḥ॥ Śrīkeśavāyanamaḥhariḥom॥sūtaḥ॥ praṇipatyājagannātham nārāyaṇamanāmayam itihāṣottamam puṇyam pravakṣāmi yathātatham*

MsD3, Repository: IGNCA, Devanāgarī, micro film style

The beginning: *praṇipatyajagannātham nārāyaṇamanāmayam itihāsottamaṁ puṇyam pravakṣāmi yathātathā*||

Ms M1-Repository: Kerala, Kariavattom, old Malayalam script, worm-eaten, complete

Scribe: Narayanan Mitran, Nambooripad Avl

The beginning: *||Śrīgaṇapatayenamah||avighnamastu|| praṇipatyajagannātham nārāyaṇamanāmayam itihāsottamaṁ puṇyam pravakṣāmi yathātathā*||

Ms M2, Repository: Kerala University Kariavattom Campus, old Malayalam, worm-eaten, till the 18<sup>th</sup> chapter, The beginning: *Śrīgaṇapatayenamah|| praṇipatyajagannātham nārāyaṇamanāmayam itihāsottamaṁ puṇyam pravakṣāmi yathātathā*||

**6.0 Conclusions:** The mode of narration in *Itihāsottama* is in harmony with the layered narrative pattern. This particular style enables the author to weave into the framework of a single narrative, multiple stories and legends. This is generally realized through the employment of dialogue. It serves diverse purposes, e.g. moral lessons, lessons on duties of a king, multiplicity of view points on a single issue, or merely preservation of historical tradition. Education should aim at overall character building and not merely on sharing information. The ideal study of history should be a synthesis between the narration of events and moral lessons. The Indian canonical texts, the *Mahābhārata* and the *Purāṇas*, exactly served this purpose. Their approach is clearly midway between didactic and documentary, and no story narrated in these texts is without a moral purpose. The main purpose in these texts is not mere narration, but to bring people closer to the path of dharma through *Viṣṇu bhakti*. Even Ramakant Chakraborty stated “the bhakti verses and aphorisms stress the need of cultivating moral and social virtues like compassion, philanthropy, universal brotherhood regardless of friends and foes, non-violence, truth and moral discipline”

**7.0 Future research:** An exhaustive, comparative study of *Itihāsottama* and other texts, e.g. the *Mahābhārata* or the *Itihāsasamuccaya*, can also be thought. There is still room for further speculation regarding the date and authorship of *Itihāsottama*. Another area to explore in the future is the story of Vikukṣi has multiple versions spread in different texts, e.g., the *Viṣṇu Purāṇa* (4amśa 2<sup>nd</sup> adhyāya), the *Bhāgavata* (9<sup>th</sup> skanda 6<sup>th</sup> adhyāya), etc., and it would be interesting and necessary to compare them in the light of the *Itihāsottama* version. I would aim at enlarging the ambit of my research and acquire more insights into the text over time.

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### 10.0 Bio note

Dr. Anusrita Mandal, Assistant Professor, Department of Sanskrit, Surendranath College, Kolkata. She has awarded Ph. D. in 2021 from Jadavpur University in the area of Dharmasastra. She has presented more than 20 papers. She has also published 20 articles in various journals and books. Her interests include Religion, Culture, Anthropology, Oral History, Regional History, Social History, Folk Art & Culture, Manuscriptology, linguistics, etc.