



The Spiritual Poems of Mahanand Sharma

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Abstract— Indian English Poetry is rich in Indian themes and symbols. Although the poets have drawn poetic elements from the Indian soil, theme of spirituality is still left untouched by the IWE. Mahanand Sharma's poetry is the poetry of spiritual taste. As a poet of Modern Indian English sensibility, he has captured the diverse themes of Indian spirituality and mythology. His collection titled *A Rudraksha Rosary and Other Poems* is an interesting story of Lord Shiva written in Miltonic blank verse. However, the poet has employed the eighteenth-century diction, he has remained novel in his tackling of themes and myths of Lord Shiva. In a comprehensive manner, he uncovers the valour and exploits of Lord Shiva and provides the spiritual light to the people groping in dark of materialism. This paper is a modest attempt to unravel the spiritual strains in the poetry of Mahanand Sharma.

Keywords— *Enlightenment, Myths, Shiva, Spirituality, Saints*

The poetry of Mahanand Sharma belongs to the age of modern Indian English poetry when poets like R. K. Singh, O.P. Bhatnagar, Krishna Shrinivas, R. R. Menon, I.K. Sharma, D. C Chambial and many others were creatively adding poems of Indian themes and images and enriching the treasure of Indian English poetry. Mahanand Sharma (born. 1924) "was educated at Kanpur, Meerut, Agra and Central Institute of English, Hyderabad". He held several prestigious positions like Reader in the Institute of Advanced Studies, Meerut University. Mahanand Sharma wrote poems in English, Sanskrit, Hindi and Urdu. His several collections like *Flowers and Buds*, *A Rudraksha Rosary and Other Poems*, *A Spiritual Warrior*, *Scattered Leaves*, *Divine Glimpses*, *Gushing Streams*, *Autumn Strains*, and *Flowering of a Lotus* bear the testimony of his spiritual bent of mind. His poetry was highly praised by David A. Jasen, Robert A. Hall Jr, R.B.D. French and Vorhees, Professor O.P. Bhatnagar, Dr Prema Nandakumar, K.R. Srinivasa Iyengar, Professor V.K. Gokak and Ms Kamala Das. 'Sharma's poetry ranks high in Indian English literature because of the poet's profound

knowledge, command of English, and ease of expressing Indian sensibility.' (Prime, 2000, p. 15)

The Book *A Rudraksha Rosary and Other Poems*, according to the poet, is "a rosary to be told for the worship of Lord Shiva" for which the poet has "plucked a few beads and strung them into a rosary," "from the huge sprawling trees of myths, fancies and thoughts". (Sharma, 2005, p. xi) The poet also adds:

The myths of Lord Shiva, which have been poeticized in *A Rudraksha Rosary*, are pure myths. They do not seem to be accretions upon a historical fact, just as several myths in the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharat* are. The myths of Lord Shiva have developed as such right from the Vedas. The forces and objects of nature and many mysterious elements were conceived, personified and worshipped as gods in the Vedas. A large number of myths came to be woven around them by the end of the Puranic period. Many of the growing myths underwent modifications and even changes in this process. The process continues

and will continue in the folktales and poems as long as there is faith. (Sharma, 2005, p. 11)

The poetry of Mahanand Sharma has been significant because after Toru Dutt, Sri Aurobindo and a few saint poets, no Indian English poet has attempted to write on Indian mythological themes. And especially, the themes and the myths of Lord Shiva have not been poetized by any Indian poet writing in English. While commenting on *A Rudraksha Rosary*, an eminent poet and critic O.P. Bhatnagar says:

A Rudraksha Rosary recreates the aesthetic of Indian poetical imagination which such visionary success that it defies the constraints of English language and bends it to a nearly perfect native use and effect. Never before was Indian poetry in English so cultured. (A Rudraksha Rosary and Other Poems, 2005, p. Blurb)

The collection thus gives a graphic view of the Indian mythical scenario in which *the Puranas* and the other scriptures tackle the element of Shiva in different versions. The poet Mahanand Sharma remains creative in assimilating all the myths into this long poem. He gives an allusion to Lord Ganesha's birth as presented in the Puranas, which is not credible to the modern sensibility. He says:

Just as the poets of the past have done while presenting many old myths, a modern poet also will do well to modify the story of their birth in a way acceptable to the sensibility of the poem of our times. This is not to say that all incidents in this age of realism must conform to downright reality. There are various points between downright reality and utmost limits of fancy, and a poet should rise or fall up to a point at which he can create in the readers the suspension of disbelief necessary for their acceptance of his presentation. (Sharma, 2005, p. xii)

The poem *A Rudraksha Rosary* is divided into twelve parts. Each part/book is divided into two parts, the first part is of argument, and the other is the poem. It is "a splendidly entertaining story of Shiva, written in Miltonic blank verse. It moves quickly to a surprising climax, and the verse is handled with skill." (A Rudraksha Rosary and Other Poems, 2005, p. Blurb) The invocation is much similar to Milton's *Paradise Lost*:

As endless are the ways to justify
The ways of God as ways of God themselves.
For this was blazed a trail by ancient bards
In Vedic hymns, Koranic verses, psalms.
Of Christian scriptures-ever-shining trail

Which Kalidas¹, the poet of Indian poets,
Impassioned Dante, sacred Tulsi Das,
The sweet-tongued Soor, Kabir in plainest words,
The sufi saint Muhammad, bard of love,
And mighty Milton followed gloriously. (Sharma, 2005, p. 3)

The Book I titled 'End of the Endless', in which part of the argument narrates the story of Brahma and Vishnu and their fight for the lordship of the world. The story describes the falsehood of Brahma on which Lord Shiva gets angry, and "a giant with a sword emerges from Lord Shiva's eyebrows and cuts off one of Brahma's five faces." (Sharma, 2005, p. 5) Later, Lord Shiva restored the face but pronounced a curse that Brahma would not be worshipped in the temples; instead, Vishnu would be worshipped in the temples in India. The entire incident is poetized creatively, and the poet marks out the falsehood of Brahma as follows:

Deceit is out at last, and so was Brahm's.
The ever-wakeful Shiv witnessed this all,
And ere an eye could twinkle, He appeared:
"What bathles all you treat as child's play!
You call a peepal leaf the end of the endless.
An undiluted, shameless, glaring lie! (Sharma, 2005, p. 13)

The Book second of 'FIRE AND LIGHT' is about king Daksh, the father of Sati, who decides to perform *Ashwamedha Yajna*. Still, the king does not invite his daughter and Lord Shiva. Parvati presses Lord Shiva to go to her father's house and later on goes along after getting permission from Lord Shiva. When Sati finds that there is no seat for her husband in *Yajna*, she takes it as the climax of insult and jumps into the fire of *Yajna*.

So saying, she jumped headlong into the flames.
The leaping, dancing flames around her licked
Her different parts - the hair, the face, the neck,
The breasts, the waist, the legs, from head to foot
And tried their best to lick her down to dust.
Before they could have turned her frame to ash
Mahesh appeared, like a bolt from the blue, in the fire.
As Jesus walked the waves but was not drowned,
Mahesh, unburnt, was walking on the flames.
(Sharma, 2005, p. 28)

The story continues in the argument part of Book three, titled 'SHOCK AND PEACE'. Lord Shiva, 'with corps

resting upon his arms, wanders shock stricken from place to place in India. From the site of *Yajna* to the point of the *Arawali* range, across the widths of *Vindhyas* to Ujjain, from Andhra's coast to Sundarbans and from the plains of Bengal and Bihar to the North of India, Kathmandu, Lord Shiva witnessed that every organ of Sati is blown off. Nothing was left in his arms when he reached the mount Kailash. He had only memories of his contact with Sati, which later on faded into the peace of Samadhi.

As never-ceasing time onward rolled, out.
Such memories yielded place to spiritual calm --
A calm superior far to ups and downs
Of gains or losses, joys and griefs profound.
Now, he sat cross-legged on the deer-skin.
His eyes closed, a glow upon his face,
He held his breath, in deep Samaadhi lost
In which all consciousness of touch, of taste,
Of smell, of voice, of heat, of cold, of rains,
Of gales, of thirst, of hunger, e'en of blows.
Was gone, and he was sitting, all in peace.
(Sharma, 2005, p. 38)

The Book's fourth titled 'DAWN' relates two stories. The first story is about the Kama, the god of sensual love, who tries to disturb the Samadhi of Lord Shiva. Lord Shiva opens the third eye to trace the source of mischief and burns the Kama to ashes. The second story is about the Rishis⁹sanis and hermits⁰ who approach Lord Shiva and tell him about the saints multiplying on earth. These saints pray to Lord Shiva to marry Parvati (who is Sati reborn). Lord Shivas agrees to the proposal, and there is a dawn of hope in the world:

The smiling rishis told omniscient Shiv,
"Sati is born again as Parvati
In the house of King Himraj and she now prays
With folded hands, in penance day and night,
For union once again with you. Our Lord,
Have you objection still?"
"No, not at all," Replied Mahesh.
The dawn now broke—the dawn
Of hope for the betterment of the human race.
(Sharma, 2005, p. 48)

The Book five, titled 'NIGHT AND MORNING', is about the hurdles of Parvati's marriage. Himraj, the father of Parvati, dissuades her from marrying Lord Shiva and indicates his ugly features. At this, Parvati points out that the ugly features of a man symbolize his spiritual and

moral qualities. Ultimately, their marriage is solemnized, and Lord Shiva tosses all diamonds given as dowry to his aids. At this, Himraj gets offended, and Lord Shiva makes him understand the meaning of their eternal love as they are the parent of the whole universe. thus, morning comes:

As wisdom dawned upon the monarch's mind,
With folded hands, he fell upon the feet
Of Shiva, begging forgiveness of Him.
The morning rays illumined all himself. (Sharma,
2005, p. 64)

The book sixth, titled 'HONEYMOON AND BIRTH', explores their marriage bonding and the birth of Lord Ganesha and Kartikeya. Goddess Kali appears and blesses Kartikeya for getting numerous victories in future. Mahanand Sharma adds:

I wish your victors soon may turn
The battlefields to open morgue
For in my heart of hearts, I burn
On bones and blood myself to gorge.
(Sharma, 2005, p. 71)

The Book seven is named as 'THE TEST DIVINE', where a saint named Mrikandu gets a son out of the blessings of Lord Shiva. Still, unfortunately, that son will have a life of only twelve years. When the sage's son dies, Lord Shiva reminds Yama that his years should not be counted with man's life, but his years must be counted as Lord Shiva's. Lord Yama leaves the boy on hearing this, and he becomes alive again.

Ten thousand years of human beings equal
One year of Brahma: Vishnu's year contains
Ten thousand years of Brahma; Vishnu's years,
When they become ten thousand, make one year
Of mine, O fool! How hast thou dared to take,
Millions of years ere his destined hour,
The soul of my devotee? Hence, Oknave.
Instantly fled the hordes of Yam and Yam.
(Sharma, 2005, p. 84)

The Book eight, titled 'THE DAYBREAK' is about Tarak's reign when the virtuous people suffer, and the wicked people thrive. Lord Shiva discusses the grim situation to Parvati. Lord Shiva wants to send Kartikeya to kill Tarak, but the mother, Parvati fears sending her son in the battle. Later on, she agrees to send him into the battle. Kartikeya defeats Tarak and kills him in the end. The entire reign of Tarak is symbolized as the night, and his assassination is called the daybreak. The poet says:

So deep in Tarak's body penetrated

That with a welkin- rending grown he fell.
 A night had ended with this fateful day
 The nightfall was the daybreak. All rejoiced.
 (Sharma, 2005, p. 94)

Book nine, titled 'LIGHT VERSUS FIRE', narrates the story of Ganesha and Kartikeya in which Lord Shiva sets a test for both Kartikeya and Ganesha. He asks them to complete a round of her who gives essential food and life will be married first. At this, Kartikeya makes a round of the earth, and Ganesha makes a round of his mother. When Kartikeya comes back and questions his father about why he made Ganesha the first, he says that the mother and not the earth is the essential giver of food and life. He speaks:

That mother gives us direct life and food.
 If only you had known this luminous truth
 Or had not lost its track in the blinding lust,
 If only you had pondered and had stayed,
 As smooth as carpet red, you could have traversed
 Much shorter space of time, the five months
 From Ashwin month to Kartik wherein i
 Persuaded Sena's father. He's willing now.
 (Sharma, 2005, p. 109)

Book ten is named 'THE UNIVERSAL BLISS', in which Mahanand Sharma narrates the story of demon Andhak's advances toward Parvati, to which Lord Shiva takes a serious note, and Lord Shiva with his *Ganas* (aids) attacks the demon and kills him. Thus, the end of the monster becomes universal bliss. The poet says:

The darkness ended. Followed light of truth,
 Of happiness, of justice mixed with ruth,
 With neither king nor subjects nor the grades
 Nor castes nor classes nor the Yawning gulfs
 Of income and the green-eyed jealousy,
 Nor falsehood nor the sins of burning sex,
 Nor hues chameleon-like with sweetness
 varnished.
 The universal bliss now reigned around. (Sharma,
 2005, p. 124)

Book eleven is titled 'THE CONSUMING TOUCH', in which the poet narrates the famous story of Bhasmasur; out of pride, Bhasmasur wishes to burn Lord Shiva with his curse by putting his hand upon His head. Still, Lord Shiva knowing his intentions well tries to make a scene, and He begins to dance. Bhasmasur starts to follow his steps, and when Lord Shiva puts His hand upon His head, Bhasmasur also puts his hand upon his head own head. As

the boon had been, Bhasmasur is burnt to ashes. The poet talks about this consuming touch as:

His body-twists like Shiva's subtle twists,
 His forward, backward steps like those of Shiv.
 In one attractive posture, then, Mahesh
 One palm upon His side-put, the other
 Upon His head, and so did Bhasmasur.
 No sooner had Bhasmasur touched his head
 Then flames enveloped all his monstrous frame-
 His head, his face, his trunk, his thighs, his legs;
 And that consuming touch which burnt so many
 Consumed his frame to ashes in a trice. (Sharma,
 2005, p. 134)

The last Book is the twelfth in a number entitled 'WORSHIP', where Arjuna and Keerat fight on the issue of ownership of a deer they killed. After a day of fighting, Arjuna bows before Lord Shiva and prays for his victory. Still, to his surprise, Lord Shiva was himself Keerat testing his archery, and finally, He blesses him with Invincibility. The poet says:

So said he, blessing Arjun-palms outspread,
 And vanished while the faithful worshipping
 Paarth
 Was halfway falling on his sacred feet.
 The deer killed was hopping around with joy.
 (Sharma, 2005, p. 142)

Thus, the poet Mahanand Sharma beautifully makes a rosary of mesmerizing stories of Lord Shiva and man's faith in Him. The language of the poet is also simple and spontaneous. Srinivasa Rangaswami rightly observes language of the poet and says:

Simplicity of language and lucidity of style are positive virtues in a narrator's art. They make for instant absorption and appreciation of what's presented. The poems included in this volume, marked by these qualities, are eminently readable. Added to it, is the author's penchant for picturisation, which places, it close to the cinematic. (Rangaswami, 1996)

The single rosary of his stories of Lord Shiva is enough to know about Lord Shiva and his miracles for the well being of humanity. Rasbihari Ghose is of the view, "Gracefully moving to form spiritual invocations to the last Book of the *Rosary*, Sharma maintains his hunger for a unique style which may find a very high realm of excellence in the future. Other than Indian epics, Milton and Dante, Rosary verses remind me of the numerous verses of Sri

Sankaracharya's Shiva Pancakshara Stotram, an example in the heritage of literature." (Ghose, 1991, p. 45)

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