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The drama Vidyāvinoda by poet Śrīdhara found in Nepal.
Probably the earliest Bengali version of the Vidyāsundara story.[1]

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Manuscript: NGMPP Reel No. B 276/16 (33 folios, first part) titled Vidyāvinodanāṭaka

Abbreviations

MS = Manuscript NGMPP B 276/16
Beng. = Bengali

Notes on page numbering of MS

In references, I adopt the numbering by MS pages instead of the numbering by MS folios. This numbering follows the way adopted in my Romanized text of the Vidyāvinodanāṭaka [Kitada 2019a].

On the use of italics

Quotations in original languages are set in italics. However, in some cases where there is no room for confusion, I set the quotation in direct typeface.

Apology

My English is yet to be corrected by a native speaker. I offer readers my sincerest apology for my mistakes in English.

§ 1. The problem: Bengali play of Vidyāsundara found in Nepal

The manuscript NGMPP (Nepal German Manuscript Preservation Project) No. B276/16 (33 folios) in its first part contains a play in Bengali language, titled Vidyāvinodanāṭaka, based on the famous Vidyāsundara story. An annotated Romanized text with a brief study of this play was published by me as Kitada [2019a]. (In this present paper, I refer to this manuscript simply by the abbreviation

[1] I would like to express my deepest sense of gratitude to my teachers and colleagues, Rahul Peter Das, Thibaut d'Hubert, Kashinath Tamot, Naba Gopal Roy, Saymon Zakaria (in alphabetical order), the participants of Middle Bengali Retreat September 2018 in the Deer Park Institute (Bir, Himachal Pradesh). This research was subsidized by the Japan Society for the Promotion of Science, Grants-aid Nos. JP25370412 and 17K02659.

"MS".)

As I have argued there [Kitada 2019a], the author of this play is Śrīdhara Dvija. His name is mentioned in the *bhaṇitā*-verse of Song. No. 83 (MS p. 28, l. 12).[2] In this *bhaṇitā*, the title of the drama is mentioned as Vidyāvilāpa "The Lament of Vidyā", while at the end of the drama, the title is mentioned as Vidyāvinoda.[3] In MS Song No. 84, it is stated that Śrīdhara was a minister (*pramāṇa*) of Fīrūz Šāh/Fīrōz Šāh (*pīroja sāha*) who was the son of Sultān Naṣīr (*śrutāna nasira*).[4]

At that time, I could not elucidate anything further about Śrīdhara, nor his patron Fīrūz Šāh. Just recently, however, Professor Thibaut d'Hubert very kindly suggested me that this author might be the same Śrīdhara, a court poet of 'Alā al-Dīn Fīrūz Šāh of Bengal (reign AD 1532[5]) of the Ḥusain Šāhī dynasty (AD 1493–1538) [d'Hubert 2018: 38]. Prof. d'Hubert also informed me of the article by Āh'mad Śarīph on this poet [Śarīph 1957]. This article deals with Dvija Śrīdhara (AD 1520–1532) and Sābirid Khān (Šā'bārid Khān AD 1517–1585), who were authors of Vidyāsundara contemporary to each other. This article also contains the original Bengali texts of their works.

§ 2. Āh'mad Śarīph's study on Śrīdhara

According to Āh'mad Śarīph, Śrīdhara's and Sābirid Khān's versions are very near to each other and seem to be both based on one and the same source [Śarīph 1957: 92].[6] In Śarīph's opinion, Śrīdhara's text, although attention is so far not as much paid as it could be, is presumably the earliest Bengali version of the Vidyāsundara [Śarīph 1957: 81; ibid. 83[7]]. Śrīdhara composed his work at the request of his master Fīrūz Šāh whose grandfather was 'Alā al-Dīn Ḥusain Šāh and father, Nuṣrat Šāh [Śarīph 1957: 81f.]. The time of composition of this work is assumed as AD 1519–1532 [Śarīph 1957: 83].[8]

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[2] MS p. 28, l. 12: kahe śrīdhara dvija vidyāvirāpa dura karo, ke kātite pāre prāṇeśvare.
[3] Besides, an expression *vidyā vinodinī* is found in Song No. 49 (MS p. 19, l. 4).
[4] MS p. 29, ll. 6–7: śrutāna nasira tanaye, bhoga purandara, medina madane, rājā śrī piroja sāha jāne, dvija śrīdhara kavirāja paramāne //84//
[5] AD 1532–1533 according to Āh'mad Śarīph [Śarīph 1957: 81].
[6] Āh'mad Śarīph also states that Śrīdhara's style tends to be terse and lifeless, while Sābirid Khān's is vivid and masterful [Śarīph 1957: 92]. Further investigation is desired as to whether this fact suggests that, of the two poets, Śrīdhara might be more faithful to the source, or even that Śrīdhara's version might have served as model for Sābirid Khān's composition.
[7] Although Āh'mad Śarīph here admits that poet Kaṅka, another author of the Vidyāsundara, is also contemporary of Śrīdhara.
[8] The opening verse of the play is dedicated to Śivasiṃha (AD 1597–1619), king of Kathmandu (i.e. Kāntipura) kingdom. The verse in question is:
ʖ svasti // śrī śrī jaya śivasiṃhadeva prabhu ṭhākula sena māniglake u[kala]□□
"Victory to Śivasiṃha, the lord (*ṭhākura*), in the Māniglaka Palace […]."
This seems to refer to the historical fact that Śivasiṃha conquered Purandharasiṃha, the local ruler (*mahāpātra*) of Pāṭan, in Nepāl Saṃvat 718 (= AD 1606). Māniglaka is the name of the palace of Pāṭan. Thus, this sentence seems to mean something like: The Māniglaka Palace was conquered/entered by Lord Śivasiṃha.
With this evidence, we could presume that the play Vidyāvinodanāṭaka, originally composed by

§ 3. King Piroja Sāha, son of Nasira

In the edition of Āh'mad Śarīph, the author Śrīdhara and his master Fīrūz Šāh are repetitively mentioned in the *bhaṇitā*-s, as demonstrated below:

rājā śrī peroja sāhā vinoda sujāna / dbija chiridhara kabirāja paramāṇa // [Śarīph 1957: 129]

nṛpati nasira sāhāra nandane / bhoga pure medoni madane //
rājā śrī peroja sāhā jāna / chiridhara kabirāja bhāṇa //
[Śarīph 1957: p. 133, 4 lines from the bottom]

Please compare this *bhaṇitā* with the one in our MS:
śrutāna nasira tanaye, bhoga purandara, medina madane,
rājā śrī piroja sāha jāne, dvija śrīdhara kavirāja paramāne //84// (MS p. 29, ll. 6–7)
[Kitada 2019a: 47]

Although Āh'mad Śarīph in his introduction refers to king Fīrūz Šāh's father as Nuṣrat Šāh [Śarīph 1957: 81f.], this poet Śrīdhara (*chiridhara*) calls him *nasira*, i.e. in the same way as our MS poet *dvija śrīdhara* does! Thus, as far as the style and expression of the *bhaṇitā*-s are concerned, it must undoubtedly be one and the same poet Śrīdhara, and his master, one and the same Fīrūz Šāh.

§ 4. Two versions compensating each other

In addition to this happy outcome that we can successfully identify the author Śrīdhara, we could

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Śrīdhara in Bengal, was transmitted into the Kathmandu Valley and reedited around this time. Besides, another Bengali play Kṛṣṇacaritra was also written under the same king Śivasiṃha [Brinkhaus 2003: 70, fn. 11]. In fact, the same incident (the conquest of Pāṭan) is mentioned in this play, too [Kitada 2019b: 5, fn. 30]. (Horst Brinkhaus mentions Śivasiṃha as king of Pāṭan. As told above, he was originally a king of Kathmandu kingdom (i.e. Kāntipura), and conquered Pāṭan.) The Romanized text of the Kṛṣṇacaritra is published by me as Kitada [2019b].
Now, we are encountering a new question. The two plays, Vidyāvinoda and Kṛṣṇacaritra, were both staged on the same occasion of celebrating king Śivasiṃha's victory. What was the relation of the two plays with each other? In my analysis, the Kṛṣṇacaritra turned out to show some intriguing features possibly associated to the Śrīkṛṣṇakīrtana [Kitada 2019b: p. 1; p. 3].
Besides, Horst Brinkhaus mentions another manuscript NGMPP G 129/4 containing the same drama Vidyāvinodanāṭaka. This manuscript was written under kings Trailokyamalla and Tribhuvanamalla (AD 1561–1613) of Bhaktapur kingdom (in the Kathmandu valley) [Brinkhaus 2003: 70, fn. 11]. This version contains many secondary additions and redactions. Intriguingly, this version, toward its end, contains Blhaṇa's Caurapañcāśikā verses. (Cf. Āh'mad Śarīph states that his Śrīdhara text contains Caurapancāśikā verses [Śarīph 1957: 92].) I am just preparing an annotated Romanized text of G 129/4.

at the same time be pleased by the fact that the considerably large part of text lacking in the manuscript used in Āh'mad Śarīph's edition is existent in our MS version.

According to Āh'mad Śarīph's statement on the manuscripts he used in his study, two manuscripts containing Śrīdhara's Vidyāsundara text were found by scholar Āb'dul Karim. The one contains 9 folios, while the other, only one folio. As to Sābirid Khān's Vidyāsundara text, only one manuscript with 8 folios, although the text being written on both sides[9], is known. [Śarīph 1957: 81; ibid. 84] Thus, all of these manuscripts are incomplete.

Indeed, there is a wide gap in Āh'mad Śarīph's edition. In p. 132 of the text [Śarīph 1957: 132], it is indicated that the folios between folio (*patra*) No. 8 and folio No. 27 are omitted. Supposing Āh'mad Śarīph's version and our MS version had the same structure and sequence of narration, the ending part of Śarīph's folio 8 corresponds to our MS Song No. 26 (MS p. 10, ll. 2–4 [Kitada 2019a: 16]). Meanwhile, the beginning part of his folio 27 seems to approximately[10] correspond to our MS Song No. 75 (MS p. 27, ll. 1–3 [Kitada 2019a: 44]). In the following, I demonstrate the condition, quoting all these passages:

Āh'mad Śarīph, the ending song of folio 8
[rāga dhānaśrī]
kānaṙiẏā chande mālinī bāndhiẏāche khopā / tachu'pare śubhiẏāche śatagarbha cāmpā //
śirete sindūra śobhe kājala naẏane / ratnamani kuṇḍala ye pariche śrabaṇe // [Here breaks off the text]

MS Song No. 26
//dhanāśrī // cāri māna payāla //
kānala chaṃdero mā(3)lini, vo[11]*dhiyā ṣvapā, upale mālati mālā keśa tala caṃpā 2*
śiśeto siṃdūra kājara nayāne (4) ratana kuṇḍala tulā piṃdhiro śravaṇa //dhru//
utema thāna niyā kumala lākhiyā laḍiro mā,[12]*(5)lini jhi hāta-ke vesāyā //26//*

Obviously, the first two verses are corresponding to each other.

Āh'mad Śarīph, the beginning song of folio 27

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[9] With this remark by Āh'mad Śarīph, it is suggested that in the two manuscripts of Śrīdhara, the texts written on the folios are one-sided.
[10] See my explanation below.
[11] It might better be read as *vā*. The difference of *vo* and *vā* is only whether the letter has a wave in its horizontal line, or not, and this difference is very often a minute one.
[12] The slant line which often seems to be used as the comma is here merely used to fill up the space at the end of the line.

śunaha bhāi koṭoẏāla [bacana āmāra] / cora nahe hena jāna rājāra kumara //
sarbaśāstre biśārada bidita saṃsāra / tāhā binu mora [kona] gati nahi āra //
hena prabhu mohora nā kara nigāra / kṛpā kara – prāṇanātha di yāa āmāra //
hena [kathā] śuni rājā ki buliba tore / ...[13] *rāja [śrī] peroja dbija kabirāja bhaṇe //*

MS Song No. 75
// śavari // eka //
hari2 caraṇa-te pade[14] *tuhmāre, nāgara kvaṭavāre, āre mukha turirāho ahmāre, hari2 //*
(2) gupata kailo svayaṃvare, nāgara kvaṭavāre, cora nāhe rājāro kumāre //dhru//
eka vāra kṛpā karo nāgara kvaṭavāra, na māro (3) na dharo prāṇesvara //75//

For the latter comparison (i.e. Śarīph folio 27 and MS No. 75), I must admit that the correspondence is not much complete. In these two songs, phrases seeming somehow comparable are solely the following:

(Śarīph folio 27) *śunaha bhāi koṭoẏāla [bacana āmāra] / cora nahe hena jāna rājāra kumāra*
(MS No. 75) *nāgara kvaṭavāre, cora nāhe rājāro kumāre*

(Śarīph folio 27) *kṛpā kara – prāṇanātha di yāa āmāra //*
(MS No. 75) *eka vāra kṛpā karo nāgara kvaṭavāra, na māro na dharo prāṇesvara //*

Actually, what is common to the two is the context (i.e. princess Vidyā's supplication to the guard not to arrest prince Sundara), rather than the two songs are parallel in words. We can only approximately locate around MS Song No. 75 a context similar to that of Śarīph's folio 27. Whatever it may be, it is clear that we can fill the gap in Śarīph's version, with the help of our MS.

§ 4. Deviation of the two versions

Although there is no doubt that Āh'mad Śarīph's text and our MS text are two versions of the Vidyāsundara story composed by one and the same Śrīdhara, it cannot be denied that deviation between the two versions is considerable. I show some instances of such deviation:

Śarīph, p. 120
[rāga dhanāśrī]

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[13] Actually, Śarīph separates each verse in two lines. I do not know what this "…", set after the first verse-half, stands for. Probably it indicates a gap or omission in the manuscript.
[14] I.e. Beng. *paṙe*.

pratāpe ānala satye yudhiṣṭhira śrīrāma / rūpeta dharaṇī tale abhinaba kāma //
bikrame bhīmasena ācārya bidyāe / bhūtale amṛta nidhi yena dbijarāe //
āila rājāra suta sānande sundara[15] */ nānā śāstre biśārada nṛpati kumāra //*

MS Song No. 10 (contained in MS p. 3) [Kitada 2019: 6]
// rāga // //[16]
se je anale satya, yudhiṣṭira rāya[17]*, rūpe ku(3)suma-śara pṛthivī juḍāye, 2*
vikrame bhīma jehne, ācāryya vidyāye, sudhā-amṛta-nidhi uyā ātha jā(4)ye //dhru//
āyilo he[18] *nṛpa, sānanda sundare, nānā śāstra viśārada rājā-ro kumāle //10//*

Here, the respective imports of the verses and their order are the same, but words and expressions are often replaced by other ones.

Let's see another instance:
Śarīph, p. 123, l. 3 from the bottom – p. 124, l. 2
[rāgaḥ kedāra gīyate]
mādhaba bhāṭera bacana sundara hṛde bhābi paritoṣa /
bidyābālira sana ghana pure mana citte bhābiyā biśeṣa //
ṣaṭa-nidarśana nāṭa-nāṭikāgaṇa āgama beda bijñāpitā /
alaṅkāra koṣa bhārata jyotiṣa yāra gamaṇe unmatā //

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[15] "[Here] has come (*āila*) X (a character's name) in pleasure (*sānande*)" is a typical phrase sung to the accompaniment of an actor when he appears for the first time on the stage. This phrase has the function to present the audience an actor, identifying him with a particular character. The same phrase is used even in today's Kārtik Nāc theater festival of Pāṭan city (the Kathmandu valley, Nepal).
Āh'mad Śarīph briefly points out the dramatic features contained in Śrīdhara's and Sābirid Khān's versions of Vidyāsundara. In fact, Sābirid Khān in one *bhaṇitā* characterizes his work as a "song drama" (*gītināṭya*). [Śarīph 1957: p. 82 and p. 92]
If taking in consideration the Nepalese dramatic manuscripts and my observation of the Kārtik-Nāc practice today [Kitada 2020], it seems to me that Śrīdhara's text presupposes a type of theater in which actors are accompanied by a group of singers and musicians, i.e. similar to the traditional theater seen in Kathmandu today, rather than a monodrama in which a single singer narrates the story with mimic gestures like Bengali *pālā kīrtan*.
[16] The spaces for *rāga* and *tāla* remain empty. It seems, the scribe intended to fill them afterwards, presumably according to the stage director's instruction.
[17] It should have been *rāye* according to the rhyme.
[18] Here are two possibilities of interpretation. *He nṛpa* may be an interjection to a spectator addressed as "king": "Oh, King! [Here is] Prince Sundara [etc.]" But in this case, it would be problematic to identify who this *king* is. The second possibility is that the term *nṛpa* is a corruption of some expression like **nṛpa kumāra*. In fact, Śarīph's edition has *rājāra suta* in its corresponding passage/verse-half (*āila rājāra suta sānande sundara*).
Or else, we might perhaps better read *āilāhe* as a verbal flexion instead of *āilo he*, for the vocalic signs of *ā* and *o* are often easy to confound.

MS Song No. 11 (first four lines) (contained in MS p. 3) [Kitada 2019a: 6]
kvaḍā // palitāla //
mādhava bhāta vacana śuni sundara, [hṛ][19]daya palama paritose 2
vidyā vālisa-ghana[20],-(6)payo laṃbhana cintā-bhāva āśaṃśe //
darśana nāṭaka śāṭaka toṭaka, āgama veda jānantā 2
kāvya koṣa bha(7)ra jotiṣa pāraga puṣpa-vāna unamaṃtā //

Here again, we see a similar condition. The two versions are so near to each other that it is easily concluded that both versions are based on the same source, or else, one version is based on the other. However, expressions are often put in different ways from each other, and the extent of deviation is so large that the two versions have almost acquired the appearance of two independent works.

What would be, then, the reason of this deviation? Does it indicate that the author Śrīdhara composed one version, and afterwards revised it into the other? Or else, is it by the hand of someone else, i.e. a transmitter or scribe, that carried out these considerable modifications to Śrīdhara's text? Namely, this question is inseparably related to the question of authorship and originality in premodern times.

At the moment I cannot offer any sound solution. But the following fact might give us some hint: Our MS has a very peculiar condition that the text of Vidyāvinodanāṭaka is written in a mixture of three kinds of scripts, i.e. Newari, Bengali and Devanagari, as I pointed out in my article [Kitada 2019a: 2]. Such a condition is a unique exception among dramatic manuscripts from Nepal, as far as I know. Perhaps, it suggests that the scribe used as his source two manuscripts of Vidyāvinodanāṭaka, written in Bengali script and Devanagari script.[21] He might have transcribed a part from one manuscript, while another part from the other manuscript, mixing them up in his text.[22]

§ 5. Wide zone covering Chittagong, Gauṙ and Kathmandu

Āh'mad Śarīph states that Śrīdhara's two manuscripts he used were found in Chittagong. Indeed, Fīrūz Šāh's father Nuṣrat Šāh (i.e. Nasira) visited Chittagong for the purpose of an expedition. However, Śarīph does not possess any evidence to decide whether Fīrūz Šāh himself visited Chittagong, when he was a prince (*yubarāja*). Therefore, Śarīph assumes that Śrīdhara was a court poet of Fīrūz Šāh in Gauṙ. That means, there is so far no evidence that could support the theory that

[19] This letter is blurred and written a little separate from the next letter.
[20] Corresponding to Śarīph's edition *bidyābālira sana ghana*.
[21] Theoretically, it is also possible that he used three kinds of manuscripts written in Bengali script, Devanagari script and Newari script.
[22] However, I am yet to examine my theory properly. In certain cases of such mixture, the scribe's way of switching from one script to another merely gave me a capricious impression.

Śrīdhara composed his Vidyāsundara play in Chittagong. [Śarīph 1957: 83]

However, Thibaut d'Hubert puts forward an intriguing theory that there once existed a wide zone of literal and cultural exchange by the medium of Middle Bengali from Nepal to Arakan and Assam to Orissa, with Gauṙ being its center [d'Hubert 2018: 296]. The case of Śrīdhara's Vidyāsundara (i.e. Vidyāvinodanāṭaka), would be a good example for showing such transboundary connection, and moreover, it is one of earlier texts.

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