

महिमामयी है मही मिथिला की

Great is the Land of Mithil

Inaugural Address

by

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Fellow participants, ladies and gentlemen!

I thank the organizers of the present National Conference for the opportunity they have provided me today to personally salute this august land of Mithil and recollect its glory through the pretext of inaugurating this meet.

The pious land of Mithil had given birth to Sīt M t , who is considered to be the standard or model of Bh ratīya womanhood. She is world-famed as Maithilī, Vaidehī, and Janaka-nandinī. The blessed father of Sīt , was Sīradhvaja, the king of Mithil . This indeed we all know, but we must also contemplate on the relationship between the meanings of the names 'Sīra' and 'Sīt '. 'Sīra' means 'plough' and 'Sīt ' is the term for furrow, the deep line engraved in the field when ploughed. Only a plough could create a furrow. By begetting Sīt , Sīradhvaja became a 'Janaka' in the real sense of the term. Indian philosophy of life is deeply imbedded in agricultural images and metaphors. The names 'Sīt ' and 'Sīradhvaja' are illustrations of this fact. Other similar examples are 'K ishṇa' and 'Sankarshaṇa' connected with '*karshaṇa*' (cultivation) from the root '*k ish*', to cultivate. Balr ma, the elder brother of Lord K ishṇa, is designated by both the names Sankarshaṇa as well as Haladhara.

That, the Indian philosophy of life believes in prosperity achieved through toil in the field, not just by manipulating market while sitting in air-conditioned chambers, is evidenced by the marriage of Sīt (who symbolizes toil done in the field) with R ma (who represents welfare). The same idea is conveyed through K ishṇa's dalliance with R dh , the former signifying agricultural labour and the latter denoting prosperity (from root '*r dh*', to prosper). The union of Vishṇu and Lakshmī has the same symbolism. Vishṇu means activity (from root '*viśh*' to be active) and Lakshmī, as we all know, denotes prosperity. This feature of Indian philosophy of life goes back to the earliest Rigvedic times. In the famous Śunam naḥ f l ich of the *Rigveda* (4.57.8), Śuna (Parjanya) and Sīra (Plough) are invoked for prosperity. To be sure, Sīra and Sīt are epitome of Indian philosophy of life that Mithil has bequeathed to us.

Abhodayam (progress) and *Niḥ reyasa siddhī* (*Moksha*, salvation) are the two most significant desirables according to Indian philosophy of life. While Sīra and Sīt are the metaphors of the former, Videha and Y jñavakya are the personified symbols of the latter. These are Mithil 's contribution to Bh ratīya Jīvanadar ana. *Videhatva*, is not 'bodylessness'; it is going beyond the body, transcending physical boundaries, moving from *Rūpa* (form, body) to *Svarūpa* (realization of self, *Ātmas ksh tk ra*). It is attainable only through the sacrifice (*Yajña*, *Ty gaḥ*) of carnal desires.

Sīt 's father Sīradhvaja, the king of Mithil , was not only an efficient ruler but also a great philosopher, a practicing Videha, a Rajarshi in the real sense of the term. His court was graced by eminent sages and seers. He was intimately connected with

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Yajñavalkya, an authority on spiritual and ritual matters as attested to by the *Śatapatha Brahmana* and *Brihadaranyaka Upanishad*. He belonged to Mithil although he had his early education in Kuru-Pañch la region under Udd laka Āruṇi. That, some women of Mithil too were worthy experts in the field of spiritualism, is evidenced by the example of Maitreyī, one of the two wives of Y jñavalkya.

In Mithil area, as the tradition has it, lived another shining star of the philosophical firmament. He was Kapila, the founder of the S ōkhya Dar ana. According to him, there are two ultimate realities. One is Purusha of which consciousness is not an attribute, but the very essence. It is the self which is quite distinct from the body, the senses and the mind. The other is Prak iti, an eternal unconscious principle which is the ultimate cause of the world.

The attitude of non-attachment towards worldly possessions, a highly praised characteristic of India's philosophy of life, is a contribution of the Janaka kings of Mithil . This fact is brought to light by all the three literary sources of ancient Indian history: Brahmanical, Buddhist and Jain. At a place in Ś ntiparva of the *Mah bha rata* (12.178.2), Janaka is quoted as saying: "My wealth is boundless (*Anantamiva me vittam*), yet I have nothing (*Yasya me n sti kiñchana*)". At another place in the same *Parva* (Mbh, 12.276.4), he is said to have said: "I have nothing, yet I live in great happiness (*Susukham bata jīva mi*)". In a Buddhist *J taka* (*J taka* No. 539), Mah janaka II of Mithil is described as uttering to his imploring wife: "We, who have nothing of our own, may live without a care or sigh" (E. B. Cowell edited English translation of the *J takas*, 6.31). Similarly, the Jain text *Uttar dhyayana-sūtra* (9.14) records Nami, king of Mithil , as telling Śakra (that is, Indra): "Happy are we, happy live we, who call nothing our own" (SBE, 45:37).

These kings appear to anticipate the theory of *Nishk ma Karma* (acting without expecting results) preached by Śrī K ishṇa in *Gīt* . In this context, it is interesting to note that a line of *Gīt* (3.20) names Janak as one who practiced *Nishk ma Karma*. "It is through action (without any expectation) alone", reads this line, "that Janaka and others reached perfection" (*Karmaṇaiva hi sansiddham sthit Janak dayah*, *Gīt* , 3.20).

Mithil along with Vai li has the credit of being one of the earliest seats of republican form of governance. Known to ancient Indian literature as the Gaṇa or Saṅgha (republic) of V ijis, V ijikas or Vajjis, this republican form of governance was exceptionally advanced even though it existed more than two and a half thousand years ago. It had its parliament or assembly, called *Sansth g ra*, where resolutions (*jñaptis*) were discussed and put to voting. Voting was known as *Śal k grahaṇa* or 'collection of rods'. Each member in the *Sansth g ra* was supplied a pencil-like

coloured wooden rod and at the time of voting these rods were collected in two separate bags one meant for voters in favour of the resolution and the other for voters, against the resolution. The collector of rods, called Śal k gr haka, was appointed by the Saṅgha and was expected to be impartial.

Mithil has the honour of producing great personalities throughout the ages, ancient, medieval and modern. The list is too long to be recounted here. The region continues to contribute to India's ethos and philosophy of life even today. For this, you have just to look at its rich literary and artistic traditions. It is difficult to assess and describe the vast and deep as well as multidimensional and multilayered contemporary contribution of Mithil in a single lecture like the present one. However, I venture to refer to just two representative illustrations that immediately come to my mind.

First is the Maithilī language that instantly flashes in mind of any one reflecting about Mithil . One can hardly find a language sweeter than Maithilī language and a literature more lyrical than Maithilī literature. "Nav Brind ban, nav nav tarugan, nav nav vikasit phūl; Naval vasant, naval maly nil, m tal nav alikūl; Viharai naval Kishor". Who will not be captivated by these lines of Maithil Kavi Kokil Vidy pati? It is not without reason that intellectuals like Maharshi Śrī Aurobindo and Anand K. Coomaraswamy felt enchanted and compelled to translate several of Vidy pati's songs in English. Ravindranath Tagore was so extremely fascinated that he sat down to write a whole poetry on the emotional style of Vidy pati.

The second is the now world famous Madhubani painting done by the women of Mithil . Images of Gods and Goddesses (mostly Lakshmi, Sit and R ma) mythological stories, rural scenes, birds and fishes considered to be auspicious, snakes thought to be protective, propitious diagrams, etc., are the main themes of these paintings. The most important is the fact that they are expressions of women's feelings, pictorial manifestations of the surrounding natural and cultural environment as seen by a traditional Indian rural woman.

These paintings were initially done only on walls and floors coated by cow dung and mud paste using rice and vegetable pastes as colours. Now, however, with growing urban impact, they are being made on paper with poster colours as well. Some new themes have also been introduced reflecting certain contemporary shifts in women's outlook.

Friends, there is hardly any doubt that the land of Mithil is, and has ever been, great, grand and glorious. However, while we must be genuinely proud of its sublime traditions and its contributions to Indian philosophy of life, we need also to be alert on this front for, at present, the inheritance of Mithil is in grave danger. The threat is not only from globalization, which is presenting materialism as an alternative philosophy of life, but also from those foreign historians and their followers who are leaving no stone unturned to distort the history of Mithil along with that of the entire North India northeast of the Gaṅg river. It is argued that this region, now designated

as 'Greater Magadha', had a culture totally different from the Vedic Culture and that it remained beyond the Vedic fold till at least second century BCE if not later still. The efforts at distortion were started long ago, before Independence, by Colonial-Missionary historians, but they continue unabated even today.

The Colonial historians, motivated by British-European politico-economic interests in India, were busy pitting every part of this country against each other, northern against southern and eastern against western. The Missionary historians aimed at expansion of Christianity in this vast country for which they thought it necessary to malign Indian culture based on Vedic foundations. Both these groups had joined hands in distorting Indian history. Now the colonial era is over though the Christian-missionary activities continue. Today the distorters of Indian history and maligners of Vedic ideology have found new collaborators among a variety of motivated historians who are reinterpreting Indian history to bolster geopolitics and identity politics. Besides, new generation of Marxist historians, with its traditional anti-Vedic attitude is there to provide them so-called academic support.

While most of us are quite familiar with the north-south (that is, Aryan-Dravidian) divide that the colonial historians created, not much thought is given to the east-west cleavage they tried to foster.

In connection with east-west segregation, special attention was paid to the legend of king Videgha M thava and his priest Gotama R hūgaṇa coming along with Agni Vai v nara from the banks of river Sarasvatī and settling on the eastern bank of Sad nīr (modern Gandak), described in the *Śatapatha Br hmaṇa* (1.4.1.14-17). It was misinterpreted to prove the late arrival of Vedic ideology and way of life in this region. It was said that the *Śatapatha Br hmaṇa* was written sometime between 7th and 8th centuries BCE and since it is describing a contemporary episode, the arrival of Videgha M thava and Gotama R hūgaṇa to the east of Sad nīr must be taken to be an event of that very time. This interpretation has been parroted by historians till today and propagated through history books.

But, this interpretation is totally wrong. That, the *Śatapatha Br hmaṇa* is not recording a contemporary event but an episode of hoary past, is abundantly clear from the context of the legend in the text itself. Besides, the date of the *Śatapatha Br hmaṇa* is at least as early as the 18th century BCE, not 8th century BCE as presumed by colonial historians.

During the last two decades several ancient sites of Bihar (like Sonepur, Senuwar, Manjhi, Maner, Chirand and Chechar-Kutubpur) have been scientifically excavated. The last named site is located east of the Gandak near its confluence with the Gaṅg where, in all probability, Videgha M thava and Gotama R hūgaṇa must have camped after crossing the Sad nīr . The archaeologists working on these sites are

unanimous in reporting that there is unbroken cultural continuity in the area from about 1900 BCE to 100 BCE without any trace of external intrusion.

Traveling from the Sarasvatī Valley to the other side of the river Gandak, Videgha Mathava and Gotama Rahūgaṇa must have passed through eastern U.P. In this region too a large number of ancient sites (such as Lahuradewa, Narhan, Dhuriapar, Imlidih, etc.) have been excavated. Evidence of continuous cultural development without any external stimulus or interference from at least 1600 BCE to 100 BCE is attested to in this area too.

In view of the above archaeological findings in Bihar and eastern U.P., the arrival of Videgha Mathava and his priest Gotama Rahūgaṇa in this area, who must have been accompanied by their men and material, cannot be placed after 1900 BCE.

It is at least a hundred years earlier, around 2000 BCE, that we find some indication of men and ideas reaching in this region from the Sarasvatī Valley. Archaeological evidence shows that farmers at Senuwar, a site situated in Rohtas district of Bihar, have been growing only paddy for nearly 200 years, but around 2000 BCE they started cultivating other cereals besides paddy such as barley, wheat, pea, lentils and millets. What is worth noting in this connection is the fact, convincingly demonstrated by the well-known palaeobotanist Dr. K. S. Saraswat, the seeds of barley, wheat and pulses grown at Senuwar are exactly of the same species that were being cultivated by their contemporaries in the Sarasvatī Valley. If this fact could be linked to the episode of Videgha Mathava and Gotama Rahūgaṇa described in the *Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa*, their arrival in the Mithil region of Bihar must be placed in and around 2000 BCE.

Even if we leave all these archaeological considerations, there is an unambiguous literary evidence to show that coming of Videgha Mathava and Gotama Rahūgaṇa to Mithil region can be dated only to a period before 2000 BCE. Gotama Rahūgaṇa, who accompanied Videgha Mathava in his journey to Mithil, was a Rigvedic Ṛishi of the famous Angir family who is credited with the authorship of as many as twenty hymns of the *Rigveda* (1.74-93). Obviously, his journey to Mithil with Videgha Mathava must have taken place in the Rigvedic period itself. Now, as we know, the *Rigveda* was composed at a time when river Sarasvatī was flowing in its full majesty from the mountains to the sea (*Rigveda*, 7.95.2); and scientific researches have shown that this river had almost dried up by 2000 BCE proving, thereby, that the Rigvedic period had ended by that time.

Surprisingly, the historians, who have been pleading for late diffusion of Vedic culture in eastern U.P. and Bihar, are not deterred by these new researches in archaeology, literature and chronology. Instead, they have changed their arguments. They now say that even though the Vedic people might have been present in the area

northeast of the river Gaṅg for quite some time, the Vedic philosophy of life (they call it Brahmanism) did not have any appreciable impact on the people of the area till as late as the second century BCE. This, in fact, is the stand taken by Johannes Bronkhorst in his book 'Greater Magadha' published from Leiden and Boston very recently (in 2007).

Bronkhorst starts with a comparison of the definitions of Āry varta as found in Patañjali's Mah bh shya (on P ṇini 2.4.10), in which the eastern limit of Āry varta is said to be the forest named K lakavana, and in Manu Sm iti (2.22) wherein it is stated that in east Āry varta extends up to Eastern Sea (Āsamudr ttu vai pūrv t). Then without any substantial reason he locates K lakavana near Pray ga situated at the confluence of Gaṅg and Yamun . Taking Mah bh shya and Manu Sm iti to be works of about 150 BCE and 200 CE respectively, he concludes that "an important change took place between the second century BCE and the second or third century CE. While the Brahmins of the second century BCE looked upon the eastern Ganges valley as more or less a foreign country, the Brahmins of second or third centuries CE looked upon it as *their* land." To do away with earlier references to the presence of Vedic people in Bihar like the one found in the *Śatapatha Br hmaṇa* (1.4.1.14-17), he adds: "The change that is recorded here concerns the eastward spread of Brahmanism. This spread cannot be dissociated from individual Brahmins moving eastward. However, the arrival of individual Brahmins does not, by itself, gain a territory for Brahmanism. For this to happen, Brahmins have to be recognized as Brahmins, i.e., as people who are members of the highest group of society by birthright."

Bronkhorst's hypotheses about what he calls 'the separate culture of Greater Magadha' and the late arrival of Brahmanism in eastern U.P. and Bihar are based on conjectures, willful thinking, misinterpretation of data and incorrect chronology. Nor are his ideas new. A sort of cultural dichotomy between Kurus and northern Pañch las, on the one hand, and Kosalas and Videhas, on the other, that is, between *janas* living respectively on the southwestern and northeastern areas separated by the Gaṅg , was advocated about a century and a quarter ago (in 1882) by Oldenberg and revived in our time by scholars like Michael Witzel. However, unless we challenge and expose these scholars, their arguments and opinions will continue to create misunderstandings in academic circles allover the world. And, please note that there are many Bronkhorsts and Witzels not one or two.

Thanks a lot for your kindness and courtesy.
