

Punnaśseri Nambi Neelakantha Sarma: Life, Works

Dr. Smitha. J

Abstract :-

Punnaśseri Nambi Neelakantha Sarma (1858–1935) was one of the most influential Sanskrit scholars of Kerala during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Reverentially addressed as *Gurunāthan* by his contemporaries, he played a pivotal role in democratizing Sanskrit education at a time when it remained largely confined to elite sections of society. Born into a traditional Namboothiri family, Neelakantha Sarma underwent rigorous gurukula training in diverse disciplines such as Vyākaraṇa, Alaṅkāra, Ayurveda, Astrology, and classical Sanskrit literature under eminent scholars. His inclusive educational vision led him to admit students irrespective of caste or creed into his *kalari*, thereby contributing significantly to the educational renaissance of Kerala.

His scholarly contributions span multiple genres, including poetry, commentaries, critical essays, astrology, and journalism. His notable works such as *Īhāpurāryāstavam*, *Śailābdhīśvaraśatakam*, *Buddhāstāśatakam*, *Dīpastambhaśatakam*, and his authoritative commentaries on astrological and ritual texts reflect his intellectual versatility and depth. The establishment of the bilingual journal *Vijñānacintāmaṇi* marked a landmark intervention in popularizing Sanskrit knowledge among the masses. Furthermore, his lifelong commitment to education culminated in the founding of the *Sārasvotodyotini Sanskrit Pāṭhaśāla*, one of the earliest institutions in Kerala to offer Sanskrit education without social discrimination. Through his writings, institutions, and reformist outlook, Punnaśseri Nambi Neelakantha Sarma occupies a distinguished place among

the architects of the Kerala Renaissance and remains a seminal figure in the history of Sanskrit scholarship in South India.

Keywords

Punnaśśeri Nambi Neelakantha Sarma; Kerala Renaissance; Sanskrit Education; Gurukula Tradition; Vijñānacintāmaṇi; Sanskrit Journalism; Astrological Literature; Commentarial Tradition; Social Inclusivity; Kerala Sanskrit Scholarship

Childhood and Education.

Neelakantha Sarma was born in Punnaśśeri Ellam on 17th June, 1858, as the son of Sreenarayana Sarma and Pappimanema at Perumuṭiyūr near Pattambi, Palakkad district¹. His father died in 1863; and he was brought up by his mother, thereafter. Neelakantha Sarma started learning at the age of 5 under Āraṇottu Varrier who was their Kulaguru(family teacher). In those days there existed certain traditional formalities and writes for the beginning of learning the alphabet. Āraṇottu Varrier, taught him the rudiments of Mathematics *Amakośam*, and *Siddharūpam*. Another teacher named Keralavarma Unittiri came to Punnaśśeri Ellam and taught Neelakantha Sarma Sanskrit poems, plays, *Hora*, *Praśnamārga*, *Jātakadeśam*, *Līlāvatī* and astrology².

Neelakantha Sarma had great reverence towards his master Keralavarma Unittiri. This respect lasted throughout his life and when he composed the book *Praśnamārga vyākhyānam*, he added a poem in it paying respectful obeisance to his master. C.P Krishnailiyath has stated this incident in his biography³. After learning the rudiments and primary lessons Neelakantha Sarma began his higher studies. It was Chitilappally Appusastrī who first taught him *vyākaraṇa śāstra* and later he went to the scholar Tṛppaṇott Sankaran Moosath.

Neelakantha Sarma lived in the gurukula of Sankaran Moosath for twelve years. There, in addition to the aforesaid texts and subjects,

¹**Notes and references-** K.P.NarayanaPisharodi, *Punnaśśeri Nambi Neelakanthasarma*, Department of cultural publications, Government of India, Thiruvananthapuram, 1990, p. 1

²*Ibid.*, pp. 15-16

³*Punnaśśeri Nambi Neelakantha Sarma*, Kerala sahitya Accademy, Trissur, 1974, p. 21

Neelakantha Sarma learned *Aṣṭāṅgaḥṛdayam*, *Kāvyaśāstra*, *Alaṅkāraśāstra* etc. In those days Neelakantha had a colleague named Manatala Neelakantha Moosath.

Vijñānacintāmaṇi

Neelaklantha Sarma had an earnest desire to share his knowledge with and that was why he started the journal *Vijñānacintāmaṇi*. His intimate friend Vellānaśśeri Vasunni Moosath also helped him to start his enterprise and became the first editor of this journal. *Vijñānacintāmaṇi* was a fortnightly at the beginning. It was a half Sanskrit journal. It has two parts one Sanskrit and the other part Malayalam and it gave the journal a novelty. The parts were named *Samskr̥ta Mayūkham* and *Malayala Mayūkham*. In the first year both the *Mayūkhams* were printed in Malayalam scripts. It had circulation only in Kerala. *Vijñānacintāmaṇi*'s publication came to an end after one year because of the low number of subscribers and the unhealthy physical condition of the editor. Later in 1887, the journal was republished⁴. It contained two sections. *Samskr̥ta Mayūkham* was in *grantha* script. It had a similarity with the early forms of *Vijñānacintāmaṇi*. This section contained essays on various topics, local news, puzzles, cross- words, political satires and so on.

Vijñānacintāmaṇi is considered as the first great step of Neelakatha Sarma in the realm of education. He wrote numerous articles and essays in the journal till its last issue. This is also considered among his great contributions to the people and society.

The Works of Punnaśśeri Nambi Neelakantha Sarma

Punnaśśeri Nambi Neelakantha Sarma's works show his dexterity in writing articles and books. Almost all of them were in Sanskrit. Several introductions and book reviews were also written by him. He has also written articles for several Sanskrit newspapers like *Saḥṛdaya*, *Mitraghoṣṭi* and *Mañjubhāṣiṇi*. He has also written many essays in Malayalam which were published in the magazines like *Bhāṣāpoṣiṇi*, *Sārabodhini*, *Mangalodyam*,

⁴*Ibid.*, p.24

Rasikarañini and *Dhanvantari*. At times he has also contributed articles to the *Malayāla Manorama* daily.

Īhāpurāryāstavam, *Ghoṣāpurimahārājñīcaritam*, *Śailābdhīśvaraśatakam*, *paṭṭābhiṣekaprabandham*, *Sṛṅgāramañjarīmaṇḍanam*, *Buddhāstāśatakam* and *Dīpastambhaśatakam* are his important Sanskrit works.

Īhāpurāryāstavam

This is a song of praise and prayer which contains one hundred ślokaś. It is said that Neelakantha Sarma was affected by the adverse Dvātrimśat yogam⁵. He decided to get rid of that curse by making penance and prayer to his household deity īhāpura bhagavati. Thus *Īhāpurāryāstavam* was written in praise of this goddess. Each stanza of this poem ends with praise to goddess thus:

*durgām devīm prapadye śaraṇamahanaśēṣāpadunmūlanāye*⁶

It means, oh, goddess, I take refuge in you, save me from all devils and difficulties.

Ghoṣāpuri Mahārājñī Caritam

This poem was written in praise of the mother queen of Ambāṭikovilakam. She was the mother of Vidwan Ettan Thampuram Samoothiri (Samoothiri is the title of the king of Calicut). Kunjunni Raja had opined that, Manavikrama Ettan Thampuram is the author of this text and not Punnaśseri nambi⁷

Śailābdhīśvara Śatakam

It depicts the life history of Vidvan Ettan Thampuram (zamorin of Calicut). The main attraction of this work is the depiction of the relation between Nambi and Ettan Thampuram⁸.

Paṭṭābhiṣeka Prabandham

The crowning ceremony of the emperor George V is the main plot of this text.

⁵According to the astrological calculation Neelakantha Sarma's life was supposed to end at his 32nd age. This evil effect is called Dvātrimśad yoga. Hence in order to get rid of that evil he decided to go to Trppangṭṭou temple and the goddess Īhāpurārya for a year] ,C.P.Krishnan Ilayath, *Op. Cit.*, p.40

⁶*Idem*

⁷Kunjunni Raja.K, *The Contribution of Kerala to Sanskrit Literature*, University of Madras, 1980, p.259

⁸Vadakkumkoor RajaRaja varma, *Op. Cit.*, P.195

Śṛṅgāramañjarīmaṇḍanam

Śṛṅgāramañjarīmaṇḍanam is a famous work by Vidvan Ettan Thampuran. A critical analysis of this work was out even at the time of Neelakantha Sarma himself. He was against the arguments of the author; and so, he constructively criticized the same work.⁹

Buddhāstāsatakam

This text portrays the worship the poet on Lord Buddha, who had given up all the happiness for the sake of the common masses¹⁰.

Dīpastambhaśatakam

This work praises the light house (Dīpastambha) of Guruvayoor temple. It was donated by C. Sankaran Nair in 1909¹¹. He was a great administrator and a patriot. The construction of this light house was done under the guidance of Sri Kontimenon, the Devaswam Secretary. At the time of construction, a number of poets, who were assembled there wrote ślokas praising the light house, and presented them on the temple dais. Later, Kontimenon decided to publish these compositions which were 226 altogether. He wanted 327 ślokas for the publication because the light house could enclose 327 lamps at a time. For the same reason he approached Neelakantha Sarma. According to the request of Kontimenon, Nampi composed 101 ślokas in Sanskrit. This composition is known as Dīpastambhaśataka. He wrote a commentary on *Praśnamārga*. He also wrote a simple text on astrology named *Jyotiśāstrasubodhinī*. This text also provides the details of Mathematical symbols. Nambi wrote commentaries for *pañcabodham*, *camatkāracintāmaṇi*, *Aśaucadīpika* in Malayalam.

Pañjabodhavyākhyā

Punnaśseri Nambi is the author of this commentary. It is a commentary of *Pañcabodha*, an astrology text by Puthumana Chemathiri.

Camatkāracintāmaṇi vyākhyā

It is authored by Punnaśseri Nambi and it is a commentary of an astrology text supposed to be written by Melputtur Narayana Bhattathiri. In

⁹*Ibid.*, Pp.195-196

¹⁰*Idem.*

¹¹Chovalloor Krishnan kutty, *Oreyoru Deepastambham*, vol.6, Issue No.9, July 2014, p.83.

the prologue of this text, Nambi praises Kerala Varma Unithiri , his teacher in astrology.

Aśaucadīpikāvyaḥkhyā

Aśaucadīpika is a text which details about ‘pula’ and other impurities mentioned by Mahishamangalam Parameswaran Namboothiri. It consists of 167 ślokas or verses and Punnaśśeri Nambi wrote a commentary on this entitled *Aśaucadīpikavyākhyā*. He also wrote Sanskrit commentaries for ancient works named *Mahiṣamaṅgalam Bhāṇam* and *Śrīkṛṣṇaviāsakāvya*. The commentary was for the first four *sargas* only. He also wrote a preface on an allegorical work named *Sātvikasvapnam* of Sambhusarma¹².

Viśākhaviḥayollasānumodanam, *Aṣṭamīcambuvyaḥkhyānam*, *Mañjarīmaṇḍanam*, *Paṭṭāmbipañcāṅgam* and hundreds of other Sanskrit essays and Malayalam essays are some of his other contributions to the literary world. Neelakantha Sarma encouraged the language scholar or linguists in Kerala, but it seems that he never wrote poems in Malayalam.

Punnaśśeri Nambi was interested and careful to publish and propagate the unpublished works. In this attempt he co-operated with the Kerala Granthamāla at Kottakkal. Thus Nambi published many old texts and manuals. During that period Vasunni Moosath started a Granthāvali this entitled *Sāhityaratnāvali*. It is said that this manual was composed at the encouragement and persuasion by Punnaśśeri Nambi.

The available works by punnaśśeri Nambi is in *Grantha* Script thus they are limited from the reading public and complete information is not available about those texts.

Paṭṭāmbipañcāṅgam

The result of the studies conducted by Neelakantha Sarma for the sake of the common mass is visible in *Pattambi Pañcāṅgam*. In 1873, Neelakanthasarma when he was 15, started publishing the *Pañcāṅgam*. This text starts with the praising of his family deity Engayēr goddess and Navagraha *Pattambi Pañcāṅgam* was a reliable work; and was famous among foreigners with large popularity outside Kerala too¹³. Neelakantha Sarma directly calculated the *Pañcāṅgam*, while printing and distributions was done

¹²Kuttikrishna Marar(Ed), *Sātvikasvapnam* of SambhuSarma, Mangalodayam press, Trissur, p, I

¹³Punnaśśeri Nambi Neelakantha Sarma, *Paṭṭāmbi pañcāṅgam*, Kunnamkulam, 1934, P.5

by another authority. The immense knowledge of Nambi in the realm of astrology is visible in these *Pañcāṅgas*.

The Establishment of Samskr̥ta Pāṭhaśāla

Punnaśśeri Nambi established the Sanskrit Pāṭhaśāla , with an intention to share his wisdom and earned knowledge to the deserving candidates. For this the words of Harṣa, the great poet inspired him tremendously.

Mahakavi Harṣa's excellent words:

*adhītibodhācaraṇapracāranai-
rdaśāścatasraḥ praṇayannupādhibhiḥ
Caturdaśtvam kṛtavān kutaḥ svayam
na vedmi vidyāsu caturdaśa svayam*¹⁴

This śloka is taken from the *Naiṣadhīyacarita* of Śrīharṣa .In the first sarga, Harṣa depicts that Nala the central character of the Kāvya as having studied 14 knowledge systems. They are 4 *Vedas*, 6 *Vedāṅgas* and 4 *Upāṅgas*: Related to these Nala accepted four situations. They are *Adhīti*, *Bodham*, *ācaraṇam* and *Pracāraṇam*. *Adhīti* means to deliberate the sounds, *Bodham* means to understand the meaning of the sounds, *Ācaraṇa* means to practice the understanding of knowledge in the routines and *Pracāra* is related to the establishment of knowledge among the people.

These situations can also be traced from the life history of Punnaśśeri Nambi Neelakantha Sarma. He started an educational institution named *Sārasvotodyotini* (Punnaśśeri Kalari)in 1889 at Pattambi¹⁵ for the common people to gain the knowledge in Sanskrit.

The main aim of Punnaśśeri Nambi behind the establishment of Punnaśśeri kalari was to make the people realize the value of Sanskrit language understand that Sanskrit is not the monopoly of a few. Sanskrit occupies a prominent place in languages and is considered as the mother of all languages.

In the beginning students were taught in the Ellam. Later when the number of students increased, he started a Sanskrit school called

¹⁴AcharyaShesharajasharma‘Regmi’[Ed],*Naiṣadhīyacarita*of Śrīharṣa, Chaukhambha surabharati Prakashan,Varanasi,2008,1.4

¹⁵Platinum Jubilee souvenir, S.N.G.S college,Pattambi,1986, p.12

Sārasvotodyotinī Pāṭhaśāla(PunnaśśeriKalari). It was known by the name Sārasvotodyotinī Sanskrit college. Punnaśśeri gurukula was the first school where students from different classes of society were admitted without any discrimination of caste and religion.

In 1935 Punnaśśeri Nambi Neelakantha Sarma, the one who dedicated his whole life for teaching and propagating legacy and glory of Sanskrit passed away. On the banks of the Nila River, three institutions were constructed in his memory .They are Sree Neelakantha Government Primary School, Pattambi Government Oriental high School, and Pattambi Sree Neelakantha Government Sanskrit College, which is also known by the name 'Pretyagranalanda' which was given by great poet Ulloor. It was because of Punnaśśeri Nambi's hard work that Sanskrit education in Kerala got strength, vitality and glory. He had a prominent place among the Kerala renaissance figures .He is a part of history of Kerala.

*Asst.professor on contract (Sanskrit), S.D college, Alappuzha.