

# SARASWATICHANDRA: AN EXAMPLE OF STRUCTURAL NOVELTY IN THE LATE 19<sup>TH</sup> CENTURY FICTION IN GUJARATI LITERATURE

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## Abstract

*Besides being a landmark in popularising Novel as literary genre in Gujarati literature, Saraswatichandra can also be credited for the unparalleled and unprecedented structural nuances in Gujarati literature. Specific features of literary genres distinguish them from each other. Consciously or unconsciously, the authors sometimes adopt one genre's characteristic in other. Govardhanram Tripathi's magnum opus, Saraswatichandra is one such unprecedented instance in Gujarati literature where a novel, a prose work finds the feature of verse, an epic. Perhaps it is one of the reasons why it is considered as one of the masterpieces in Gujarati literature. In the present paper, the researchers try to shed some light on this structural novelty of confluence of two genres – Prose and Epic, making Saraswatichandra a Prose Epic of the age.*

**Keywords:** Saraswatichandra, Prose Epic, Epic, Govardhanram Tripathi, Gujarati Literature.

## INTRODUCTION

The history of fiction in Gujarati literature is quite shorter compared to the West. Gujarati literature gets its first novel Karanghelo by Nandshankar Mehta in 1866 (Das 201) while the West found the seeds of fiction way back in the early 18<sup>th</sup> century. Novel as a form was not that much experimental and popular until Govardhanram Tripathi's magnum opus Saraswatichandra (1887-1901) was published. Saraswatichandra, besides being a landmark in popularizing Novel as literary genre in Gujarati literature, presented unparalleled and unprecedented structural format. Though, the novel is entirely in prose, it adopted the characteristics of epic, a verse format. Here are the definitions of both Novel and Epic.

Anthony Burgess in her contribution on Novel on Encyclopaedia Britannica opines that, 'Novel, an invented prose narrative of considerable length and a certain complexity that deals imaginatively with human experience, usually through a connected sequence of events involving a group of persons in a specific setting.' In A Handbook of Literature by William Harman and Hugh Holman, the epic is defined as 'a long narrative poem in elevated style presenting characters of high position in adventures forming an organic whole through their relation to a central heroic figure and through their development of episodes important to the history of a nation or race.' Iliad, Odyssey, Paradise Lost, Aeneid are some of the well-known epics in the West. Mahabharata and Ramayana are the two well-known epics in India.

Out of these definitions, one can conclude that an epic is a long narrative in poetic form while a novel is a work of fiction in prose. Both have their own characteristics. Not-too-long and Not-too-short length, limited characters, not too many subplots revolving around the central plot, simple and strict plotline, and prose format and so on – these characteristics can be attributed to a novel. Lengths of more than one book, number of characters, number of subplots, too many digressions, complexity in the plot line, verse format and so on – these features can be attributed to an epic.

It would really be a rarity when such two various literary genres adopt each-others' features. Gujarati literature faces dire scarcity of such experimental genres that have the confluence of two genres. Govardhanram Tripathi's (1855-1907) Saraswatichandra is one such rarity in Gujarati fiction. Vishwanath Bhatt called it an 'epic in prose'; while Dolarrai Mankad hailed it as 'Sakalakatha'. Umashankar Joshi also appreciated the novel and called it 'the poem of the Age written in prose'. (Wiki) Despite entire novel is written in prose, the grandeur of the novel elevates it to the scale of an epic. Dr. Anandshankar Dhruv, a scholarly literary critic of the Pandit Age of Gujarati Literature hails the novel as a present-day Mahabharata or Purana. (Meghani VII)

## MANY SUBPLOTS LEADING TO THE MAIN PLOT IN SARASWATICHANDRA

Two fictional towns named Suvarnapur and Ratnanagari are the physical settings in the novel. The novel revolves around two Brahmin families. The hero of the novel is Saraswatichandra, from whose name the title is taken. He is a young and educated lawyer who loves literature. A charming and proficient lady Kumudsundari, sometimes called Kumud, is the heroine of the novel. They are both engaged to each other. Still for certain reasons, Saraswatichandra leaves his home. He starts pilgrimage assuming the name Navinchandra. Consequently, Kumudsundari's parents marry her to Pramadadhan, the son of Buddhidhan of Suvarnapur. Saraswatichandra (with the pseudonym 'Navinchandra') arrives in Suvarnapur and happens to meet Buddhidhan. Impressed by his eloquence and confidence in talk and command over English, Buddhidhan invites him to stay with him. Saraswatichandra accepts the proposal, resides at his home and finally becomes important member of his family. But soon, because of the tensions and issues that contact with Kumud is causing to both of them, Saraswatichandra leaves Buddhidhan's house. On the way, he is attacked by bandits. The Sadhus of Sundargiri pick him and take care of him. At the same night, Kumud also gets attacked by the same bandits gang while she was on her way to visit her parents' home. She is saved by her grandfather, who had come halfway to receive her. Kumud somehow falls into the river and is picked up by Sadhvis at the bank of the river and is unknowingly taken to Sundargiri where Saraswatichandra is. They both start living the life of ascetics then. The ascetics there realize the facts of the past life of these two, and try their best to reunite them. Saraswatichandra's parents finally visit Sundargiri and decide to take these duo back to the world. There are number of short stories that make a whole story of an epic. The main story or plot has subsequent subplots. The novel Saraswatichandra is not just the romantic tale of the Saraswatichandra and Kumudsundari's relationship but actually a tale of rich culture for the sake of romance. So, through the lives of the characters associated with Kumudsundari and Saraswatichandra, Govardhanram has woven multiple stories in each part of the novel around the chief love tale of these two. The stories and the lives of Buddhidhan, Pramaddhan, Gunasundari, the ascetics of Ratnagiri, the eventful journey of the hero Saraswatichandra and many more small events in the novel, - this involvement of so many stories makes the structure of the novel similar to an epic.

## FOUR LONG BOOKS

Alike an epic, Saraswatichandra ran about in 2000 pages and in 4 volumes for 15 years. (Wiki)  
The Administration of Buddhidhan (Volume 1) - published in 1887  
The Family-maze of Gunasundari (Volume 2) - published in 1892  
The Political Administration of Ratnanagari (Volume 3) - published in 1898  
The Dreamland of Saraswati (Volume 4) - published in 1901. (wiki.)

Each of these volumes deals with special thematic concerns and has independent beginning and end. The first part deals with political matters associated with Kumudsundari's father-in-law, Buddhidhan of Suvarnapur and the family-life of Buddhidhan and Shathray draws special attention. The author gives a realistic picture of the crookedness and struggle of the then indigenous states in the power struggle between Buddhidhan and Shathray. Saraswatichandra and his family's life depict the lifestyle of the aristocratic people of Mumbai. The second part plots the story of Kumudsundari's mother Gunasundari and the joint family of her in-laws. Gunasundari emerges as an ideal Indian woman of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, a selfless and tolerant one who sacrifices all her life for the paternal family initially and husband's family later. The state administrative system of the city of Ratnanagari is depicted in the third part, which paints the picture of an ideal country and its administration. The fourth part is the story of the life of the monks on the Sundargiri mountain and the detailed philosophy of human life. The fourth part shows the future of India through Saraswatichandra and Kumud's dreams. Saraswatichandra and Kumudsundari are reunited in this part. The questions of the spiritual life of human beings are discussed through the story of Vishnudas Sadhu and the sadhu-sadhvis (ascetics) of Chandravali Maiya Math in the fourth part.

The timeline of the events is not more than two or three months. Still, the kind of storytelling the novel presents gives the experience of reading a work as if one has gone through a big timeline. The reason why this novel had a profound impact on the educated society of Gujarat before Gandhiji is the deep comprehensive thinking about life expressed in this work and the creative genius that gives the form of novel to that thought. The ambition of the author was to present to the public his own ideas about the religion, state and home of the Indian people at the confluence of three cultures - Ancient East, Modern East and Modern West. That is why the object of the novel has become multi-centered, which, at times, invites complexity in the plot.

## NUMBER OF CHARACTERS

Too many characters is another feature of this novel that resembles an epic. To present various subplots relating to the central plot, the author or the poet requires some more characters. Almost 150 characters are

presented in the novel. (Joshi, 48) Hailing from different walks of life, these characters paint a complex picture of the social life of 19th century Gujarat. They are representative of the past-present-future, they are realistic and sentimental. Each character is valued to the place and situation they are allotted in the novel. They all have their importance in carrying forward the plot to make a whole story. They all grow and novel and do not stay static. The author has created many major-minor characters from individuals in his own experience. Saraswathichandra is among the foremost novels in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century Gujarati fiction to present this newness of too many characters. Both men and women characters have been offered apt treatment according to the need of the situation in the novel.

### ELEVATED PROTAGONIST

It won't be exaggeration if one would feel that the character of Saraswathichandra is given special attention in any given situation in the novel. With depicting the details of the factors that shape his personality in the novel, the author has developed a deep sense of putting the character's behaviour into a convincing role. The character of Saraswathichandra seems dignified by his virtue wisdom and education. Just like some central epic protagonist, Saraswathichandra possesses calm composure in tough-times and deals with his power of wisdom. He is leaned towards religion. He might not be a typical Quixotic figure with adventures all around him but certainly has the characteristics that elevate him from the others as the central character. The novel is not a picaresque one and author did not want him to look like a picaro, yet he wanders a lot, if not creating, inviting or involving in the events directly, his presence in the scene certainly makes the reader feel that something would happen. Alongside the rational ability, emotional appeal of Saraswathichandra attracts the reader. He is ready to sacrifice his limbs for the betterment of the society. He is a man of action, no less a sage. He is addressed as mahatma several times in the novel. He has studied law. Such educated protagonist in the novel is a rarity in late 19<sup>th</sup> century Gujarati fiction. This shows the grandeur of the protagonist of the novel.

### DIGNIFIED DICTION

Govardhanram Tripathi is well cherished for his command over Gujarati language. His scholar linguistic skills are evident in Saraswathichandra. The style of the novel, which rests upon narration, depiction, and dialogue, assumes various postures depending on the occasion. It has a variety of levels in the language used, such as the style of long sentences that differ from the prose, the eloquent style seen in correspondence, or the poetic style with emotional impulses. The language of this work becomes scholarly because it applies unfamiliar words, creates new words, weaves rhetorical, original as well as translated poems and quotes. On the other hand, in the speech of the characters with low power or low intelligence, the idioms and proverbs are interwoven with diligence. An epic generally is written in such highly stylised diction. Govardhanram managed to maintain dignified language with suitable dialect to the characters.

### IN MEDIA RES BEGINNING

An epic is generally characterized by in media res beginning, that is to say, it begins in the middle of some actions, at the point which result of some past events and would lead the novel towards further events. Saraswathichandra also has such in media res beginning. The first part of the novel begins with Saraswathichandra's (with his camouflaged name Navinchandra) arrival at Suvarnapur. The fact that he had reached Suvarnapur after leaving his own home and having been on pilgrimage is revealed later. The chain of events begins after his arrival at Suvarnapur. Hence, the beginning of the novel is identical to that of epic.

### SOCIETY AND ITS CUSTOMS

The novel holds the mirror to the 19<sup>th</sup> century society of Gujarat, which was a part of Mumbai in that time. Certain social customs imposed over women especially found their direct or indirect mention in the novel. Saraswathichandra end up marrying Kumud's sister Kusumsundari at the end because Kumud was a widow at that time. Hence, widow marriage or remarriage remained a taboo. On the other hand, his father Lakshminandan did marry once again. Kumud was married to Pramaddhan when she was hardly fifteen. It shows the prevalence of child marriage in the society. The custom of Ghunghat is also present in the novel. Kumud is a rarity in the case of getting education since not many women could get education in those times. Patriarchal dominance can also be witness in the novel in majority of male characters. It was nothing but the reflection of the social life of the time. The second volume sheds special light on the way family lives were lived by the women in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Gunasundari and her ways of dealing with the family matters show the composed and calm picture of women managing household chores. Almost all the aspects of social life are touched upon directly or indirectly in the novel. Life styles of lower and middle class is vividly portrayed by the author. Political aspect of the society is very diligently put forwarded in the novel in the third volume.

## CONCLUSION

Suresh Joshi, a Gujarati literary critic, criticized the novel for its structural failure, (Wikipedia) Because more than one stories are dealt with, storytelling does seem breaking down a bit in the novel. But the story-weaving skill that Govardhanram Tripathi has managed to execute is not shown any of his predecessors and successors for a long time after him. The way the element of time has been shrunk with the help of background, memory, letter writing etc. was a great novelty for the novel written at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The level of compilation-power appears in the first two volumes, of course, it does not appear in the last two. The author's biographical contemplation comes only as an idea and hence the third part abandons the novelty. However, the author has made some efforts to make these ideas artistic. As such, the third part discusses the simple state by allegorically depicting the characters of the Mahabharata. In the fourth part, the future India is shown by depicting the dreams of Saraswatichandra-Kumud in the secluded Soumanasya cave.

Govardhanram Tripathi began the legacy of writing such voluminous novels. There are rare examples found, like Ramanlal Desai's 4 volume novel Gramlakshmi (1933-1937), after Govardhanram who tried to follow his footprints and this is why Sarasvatichandra is a milestone of Gujarati fiction, not only content-wise but format-wise as well. The confluence of both a novel and epic, novelty of genre in those times, gives it higher structural sublimity.

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