

## *Krishi- Parashara: an Early Sanskrit Text on Agriculture*

By Manikant Shah and D.P. Agrawal

*KRISHI PARASHAR* is a compilation of the original text in Sanskrit, is a translation by Sadhale with commentaries by H V Balakundi and Y L Nene. The text deals with meteorological aspects and general agriculture. In the introduction to the exposition of this work we are told about the Vedic Aryans and their relation to agriculture the import of which is established with the prominence accorded by the Aryans to the gods of the natural and atmospheric elements like the rain, the wind and agriculture in general. 'The knowledge and techniques of farming have always been a part and parcel of the Indian civilization. That the culture and civilization of the Vedic Aryans were based on and centered round agriculture is fully borne out even by the oldest portions of the Vedas. The importance of Indra, the rain god and the large number of prayers addressed to him in the *Rig Veda* prove beyond doubt that the Vedic Aryans were agriculturists'.

The book traces back the evolution of the agricultural science through the literary records to the time of Kautilya (c. 400 BC), whose work, the *Arthashastra*, also imparts prominence to agriculture. The question of the identity of Parashara the author of *Krishi Parashara* is discussed in detail. The name of Parashara appears in the ancient texts as an individual, as also an institution at different periods of time and is related to different sciences like astronomy, astrology, medicine, agriculture, social rules and code etc. We are told that, 'two more aspects must be taken into account while discussing the identity of the author: (i) Parashara also is a *gotranama*; i.e., a family name, it can be shared by several individuals belonging to the Parashara clan; and (ii) in ancient India the followers of a certain school of thought used the same name which was usually the name of the founder of that school. It is further mentioned that, 'Singh (1971) has hinted at a possibility that the book *Krishi-Parashara* in its present form must have been an abridged redaction of the original work of Parashara'.

The obvious difficulty of fixing the date of *Krishi Parashara* is also discussed. It says that, 'the problem of fixing the date of the work is directly and necessarily linked with that of the author's identity and can, at best, be answered only by venturing a conjecture vacillating between centuries. Majumdar maintains that the author of *Krishi-Parashara* was perhaps earlier than the 6<sup>th</sup> century AD but certainly not later than the 11<sup>th</sup> century AD. Leaving the Parasharas associated with the *Vedas*, *Mahabharata*, and *Artha-sastra* outside the present

context of *Krishhi-Parashara*, on account of their antiquity, Varahamihira's references to Parashara as an authority on agriculture, astronomy, astrology, and meteorology become the starting point for fixing the date of the author of *Krishhi-Parashara*. Kane and other scholars of *Dharmasastra* fix the date of *Parashara Smriti* between 1<sup>st</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> century AD. If this Parashara is identified with the author of *Krishhi-Parashara* [according to Singh (1971)], this conjecture that the 4<sup>th</sup> century is the lower limit is further strengthened'. As commentaries by Y L Nene to the text appended to the bulletin at the end, while considering the general aspects of agriculture maintains that Parashara must have written the manuscript prior to *Arthasastra* of Kautilya that is prior to 4<sup>th</sup> century BC.

The ancient texts have usually been constructed in verse and formula form known as *Chhanda* (meters), which adhere to the rules of Sanskrit grammar for such construction. The text of *Krishhi-Parashara* consists of two hundred and forty-three verses mostly composed in the popular *anustubh* (*Chhanda*) meter. Amongst the many kinds of meters differentiated by the number of syllables in the Sanskrit language the *anustubh* meter is one in which there are 8 syllables in each *pada* (line) of a verse of 4 *padas* (lines). This means there are a total number of 32 syllables in the entire verse.

The book is written for the benefit of farmers. Thus it is the theory of agriculture expounded in such a manner that the farmers would benefit by its application to their profession. It is in a way a farmer's almanac containing astronomical and meteorological data arranged according to the seasons and months of ancient India. It is the farmer's ready reckoner containing the basic data of geographical and climatic conditions, which can help him in planning and managing the activity of farming spread over several months. This treatise includes observations on all the aspects of agriculture such as meteorological observations relating to agriculture, management of agriculture, management of cattle, agricultural tools and implements, seed collection and preservation, plowing and all the agricultural processes involved right from preparing fields to harvesting and storage of crops. The religious aspect of the Indian psyche is present here as well as the text begins with the salutations to Prajapati, the Lord of the living, and ends with the prayer to the Goddess Laxmi, the goddess of wealth and prosperity.

In his commentary on the meteorological aspects H V Balakundi says, "Sage Parashara shows a remarkable quest of agricultural activities since he knows from his personal

experience the intimate and close relationship between agriculture and rainfall. It would be pertinent to note here that the sage makes full use of his astrological knowledge for predicting the availability of rainwater during the different stages of crop growth. Thus he enables us to study his concepts of clouds and rainfall”. This leads Balakundi to expose in some detail the relationship between the meteorological aspects and the astrological predictions considered by Parashara in his work. Parashara has in a major way linked the consistent meteorological conditions for agriculture to the planets and their positions. However, he points out “a critical study of this ancient text is impaired because the technique for determining the ruling planet of the year is not clear”. Balakundi says that after this the sage turns his attention to the visible causes of rainfall – the clouds. We are told that the sage lists four types of clouds, the *Aavarta*, *Samvarta*, *Pushkara*, and *Drona*. These four types differ from each other by the nature of rain that is shed by them. Though Parashara has outlined the gauging or the measurement of rainfall in relation to the different clouds yet Balakundi finds a practical difficulty in carrying out such tests as are enumerated. Balakundi says that such an imprecise and unwieldy technique of forecasting the amount of rainfall from the particular type of cloud for a year may not have satisfied for long the agricultural community of that era or the scholars of this branch of astrology. Balakundi makes a guess that a search for a better technique might have culminated in its evolution in Kautilya’s Arthshastra of the 4<sup>th</sup> century BC. Here the measurement of rainfall is in terms of *Drona* instead of *Yojanas*. Few interesting points that Balakundi makes are that the farmers are advised by the sage to observe the monthly rainfall beginning with *Paush* that is the mid of the month of March. Parashara stresses that to know the quantum of monthly rainfall the observer of the weather has to work everyday and keep track of the direction of winds by fixing a rod with a flag attached to it. According to Parashara, wind from the north or the west brings rain and that from the east or the south indicates absence of rain.

Y L Nene while commenting on the general aspects of the work by Parashara says that the importance of farming, farmers and food production is expressed and emphasized from the verse 1 to 10. Nene points out that Parashara has highlighted the importance of good management in farming, using examples relevant to his time (verse 79 to 83). He says one can get clear and strong messages in verses 79, 82 and 83. These messages are as relevant today as these were more than 2000 years ago. Nene says that we must remember that talk of sustainable agriculture without good management is meaningless and that the message of Parashara will hold true as long as agriculture exists. Nene then embarks upon the

exposition of the text under various heads such as the management of cattle, manure, the plow and other implements, the plowing, seed collection and storage, sowing and planting, water retention, weeding, draining of water, plant protection, water harvesting, reed fixing ceremony, token harvest, threshing pillar, the *pushyayatra* festival, harvesting and measuring yield, and the storage of grains, observations and suggestions which cover the entire operation, process and procedure of good agriculture.

In his concluding remarks Nene emphasizes that *Krishhi-Parashara* is unquestionably one of the oldest texts on Indian agriculture. We are told that among the crops the emphasis was clearly on the paddy (rice) cultivation. He points out that throughout the text the knowledge base in astrology that existed at the time shows up and it had influenced virtually all activities. Superstitions existed in plenty along with sound knowledge of basic agriculture. Finally, Nene says that when the whole text of *Krishhi Parashara* is taken into consideration one gets an impression that the text is incomplete. This is because Parashara describes prediction of rainfall, cattle management, construction of a plow and other implements, making furrows for sowing, and time of sowing different crops, but when it comes to detailed operations required for successfully growing a crop he concentrates mainly on rice. It may have been that the original *Krishhi Parashara* was a larger text and people took out only portions that were of interest to them. So the present text could be the version that was edited for the needs of eastern India where rice was and still is the predominant crop.

Since India is known to be a land of agriculture, *Krishhi Parashara* is an attempt of the Asian Agri-History Foundation to bring to light the agricultural knowledge of the ancient times, compiled by the sage Parashara.

**Source:**

Sadhale, Nalini (Tr.). 1999. *Krishhi- Parashara* (Agriculture by Parashara). Bulletin no.2 of Asian Agri-History Foundation, Secundrabad, Andhra Pradesh.

