

CLASSICAL SANSKRIT POETRY

Overview Classical Sanskrit poetry was composed from approximately 100-700 CE, although its highpoint was during the Gupta Empire (3rd to 5th centuries) when Kalidasa, the great court poet and dramatist, flourished. This poetry is dominated by the *kavya*, a broad literary genre that ranges from long, narrative epics (called *maha [great] kavya*) to single-stanza verses about love. What most clearly defines this capacious genre is its elaborate, even ostentatious style, that encourages poets to display their linguistic skills. One feature of the genre is its use of 'adornments' (*alankara*), including a stock of epithets, alliterations, metaphors, similes—all supercharged by hyperbole. Another feature is the use of *divani* (lit. 'reverberation'), or the connotations of words. By carefully choosing his words and putting them in a certain order, the poet can make them say much more than their surface meaning. A third important feature of Sanskrit classical poetry is *rasa*, or 'flavour', which refers to the aesthetic residue left in a hearer's or readers' mind by the poem. Given these linguistic pyrotechnics, plus sophisticated metres and the more familiar verbal skills of innuendo and hyperbole, Sanskrit classical poetry became a refined art in both its practice and its theory. It was both an artistic and an intellectual pursuit.

History Sanskrit poetry written during the Gupta Empire was a world away from the oral verse of the Vedas. During the intervening fifteen centuries or so, the language itself had changed so completely that an educated person of 400 CE would not have been able to comprehend Vedic Sanskrit without special training. At least the end section of this long bridge from ancient verse to classical poetry is visible in the *Buddhacarita*, Ashvaghosa's story of the life of the Buddha composed about 100 CE. We also have a few inscriptions dating from about the same time that give us clues as to how Sanskrit poetry evolved. In brief, these early examples of classical poetry are relatively simple constructions without the highly elaborated forms that developed during the Gupta period and after. That 'Golden Age' of Indian literature was illuminated by Kalidasa, the greatest and most prolific all Indian poets. Not only was he a masterful dramatist (author of the world-famous 'Shakuntala'), he also composed two epic poems (*Kumarasambhava*, 'Birth of the War God Kumara' and *Raghuvamsa*, 'Dynasty of Raghu'), plus a well-loved lyric poem (*Megaduta*, 'The Cloud Messenger'). Another major poet of the period is Bhartrhari (7th c. CE?), author of *Sataktraya*, a collection of 300 short verses of witty wisdom. A third important figure is Bharavi (6th c. CE?), whose fame rests on the poem *Kiratarjuniya* ('Arjuna and Kirata'), considered one of the finest epics (*mahakavya*) of the period. Lastly, we should name Magha (7th c. CE), who wrote *Sisupala Vadha* ('The Slaying of Sisupala'), an ingenious poem about Krishna killing an enemy king. Sanskrit poetry that aped this intricate and inventive classical style, continued to be written after 700 CE, but nothing reached the heights of the truly 'classical' verse. By the 12th century, when Somadeva's well-known and influential *Gita Govinda* was composed, the erudition and sophistication of the Gupta period had been replaced by devotion and piety.

Cultural Significance The influence of classical Sanskrit poetry on subsequent literature was immense. These poems represented the highpoint of cultural achievement and provided a standard for others to aspire to. That direct influence, however, waned as Sanskrit declined and regional languages develop their own literary traditions. Later poets in Hindi or Bengali imitated the ornate style of Kalidasa, Bharavi and Bhartrhari, but few could emulate it. Paradoxically, though, that decline also raised classical Sanskrit poetry to the level of the 'unobtainable past,' where it represented a 'Golden Age.' Too complex and sophisticated ever to have a broad appeal, these poems were always written for connoisseurs and have in modern times been admired largely by a literary elite. A rough parallel might be the Latin poems of Ovid and Catullus and their appeal to readers in the modern West. Indeed, one measure of the cultural significance of classical Sanskrit poets is the high regard in which they are held in European and American literary circles. They are, after all, the classics of India's classical age.

Themes

Love The great theme uniting most of the diverse forms gathered under the category of classical Sanskrit poetry (or *kavya*) is that of love. Love is passionately expressed, it is physical, sensual and often erotic; it is apparent that most of these poets had studied the science of eroticism as explained

in the *Kamasutra*. Love is everywhere—in the eyes of beautiful women, in the song of birds, smouldering in moonbeams and most dangerously in the arrows shot by Kama, the god of love. Courtiers have courtesans, and gods are smitten by damsels both celestial and earthly. There is also the relationship between Radha and the god Krishna, understood to reflect all the phases of human love, from carnal desire to devotion toward a deity to transcendent love toward an abstract object or idea. But not all the love scenes are grandiose. Many poems open with an ordinary lady swooning under a tree in an unremarkable town. She sways with despair, holds up her hands in agony and gives vent to a torrent of love-sick complaints about her errant lover and/or her rival for his affections. There is love betrayed and love lost, love regained and love renounced. Love is frequently secret, driving forward a man or woman to an unknown destiny. It is often said that the love-motif of classical Sanskrit poetry can be traced to the courtly context of its composition and the royal patronage of the poets. However, as others have pointed out, the other social setting for this classical poetry is the urban street, where the hero strolls around, like a *flaneur*, and experiences the many types of love on offer in the fast-growing cities of classical India. At a time when asceticism in both Buddhist and Hindu traditions was attracting an increasing amount of attention in religious thinking, and monasteries were packed with renunciators, other men were still at large and enjoying themselves in the world of the senses. It is no accident that the very first of the eight ‘flavours’ (*rasas*) of classical poetry was love (*rati*).

Nature The other overarching theme, and extension of the first, is nature. The poets who wrote of love did not restrict their expressions of sensuality to human beings. They extolled also the pleasures of the natural world, and in some cases they collapsed the human and natural worlds, such as in a description of wind-blown trees that sound like love-making. In fact, the detailed accounts of the changes of the seasons, the colours of flowers, the sounds of animals and the shades of night and day are rarely employed for their own sake. Instead, these natural phenomena, like the famous metaphor of a woman’s eyebrow as the crescent moon, are usually used to frame human sentiments or as personifications of their emotions. Beyond mere linguistic expertise, these classical poets again and again express a deep love for nature, especially in the longer poems of Kalidasa, who for this reason, among other things, is the best-loved of the lot. A good example is his lyric poem the ‘Cloud Messenger,’ which includes a bird’s-eye panoramic description of the landscape and rivers below (see ‘Texts and Translation’ below). What is striking in these classical poems is the power of nature, rather than the omnipotence of the gods, which is prominent in other types of Sanskrit literature, such as the myths (*puranas*). Even in the ancient Vedas, nature is often depicted as an extension of the pantheon, for example, Surya, the sun god, Indra, the rain and cloud god, and Ushas, the goddess of dawn. Here, in these later poems, by contrast, divine writ does not run very far, and even when the celestials appear, which is not very often, they resemble less all-powerful deities and more exaggerated humans. In this respect, the worldview of these poems is decidedly secular and the religious view closer to paganism, or perhaps pantheism, than to devotional Hinduism.

Texts and translations

1. Megaduta Although *Megaduta* (‘The Cloud Messenger’) by Kalidasa is a short work of a little over 100 verses, it is one of the most popular poems in classical Sanskrit. Critics and readers enjoy not only the compression and coherence of the work but also the visual images that Kalidasa creates. The story, which is slight, concerns a celestial man’s longing for his beloved. Having been exiled from the city to a mountain, during the rainy season, the lover sees a cloud pass overhead toward the city where his beautiful wife lives. The lover then addresses the cloud, urging it to become his messenger and telling it what to say to his beloved. In the most-widely admired section of the poem, the love-sick exile instructs the cloud on precisely what itinerary it must follow to reach his wife. This allows Kalidasa to describe in detail the landscape, with its flora and fauna, enabling the poet to combine the two major themes of nature and love. When the description reaches the city of his wife, the poet then evokes the ‘flavour’ (*rasa*) of erotic love. Throughout the short work, Kalidasa employs luxuriant imagery and imbues the natural world with human emotions.



(The beloved waits for her lover, as in *Megaduta*, 18th century painting, Kangra)

The extract below comes from 'The Cloud Messenger' translated by John Holcombe.

Cloud, take in the features I compile
For you of onward journey, day by day
More arduous and more testing: wearied,
Very wearied, on those peaks you'll stay
And by their foaming waters rest awhile.

Now among the wet Nichula trees where there crop
The wandering elephants you'll come to, shrink
From contact with their heavy trunks but thence
Fly up, that startled celestial women think
The wind has carried off the mountain top.

[...]

Arrived where women furrow brows for men,
And moisten eyes as of that harvest telling,
You'll stop and bless the high ground here and thence
From soil fresh ploughed and sweetly smelling
A little westward float on north again.

To Amrakuta mountain, provident
To bear your weariness and not forget
Its forest fires you quenched with rain. The poor
Remember kindness and repay each debt:
How more will one who is so eminent!

So on that summit, and in drifts unrolled
Of glistening hair, around so thickly pressed
The slopes with fruiting mangoes, it will seem
To heavenly couples passing earth's own breast,
The dark surrounded by the palest gold.

And thence to groves which shelter forest wives
To see how, waters emptied, heady pace,
Like whites on elephants when streaked with ash,
The tumbling Reva river through the rocky base
Of Vidhya mountain, full of boulders, arrives.

If now you take in moisture where there mate
Wild elephants and clumps of *jambu* bushes choke
The streams, yet drink in moderation: while

he streams, yet drink in moderation: while
Mere lightness will your worthiness revoke
It is the winds that onward bear your weight.

2. Satakatraya *Satakatraya* ('Three Hundreds') is a collection of gnomic verses considered by some critics to be one of the finest jewels in all Sanskrit poetry. Written by Bhartrhari (5th CE?), the 'three hundreds' refer to three sections of 100 poems each on a different topic: love, renunciation and moral conduct. They are both witty and wise, and unlike most early poetry in any Indian language, they reveal something of the author's personality. In his love poems (the first 100), he indulges in candid descriptions of eroticism, although there is an underlying tone of dissatisfaction, which leads him toward renunciation (in the next 100 poems). That doesn't seem to satisfy him, either, and so in the final section he tries to sum up his life's experience with pithy pieces of advice. A popular legend identifies the poet Bhartrhari with a king by the same name, whose life is summed up neatly in a story: a Brahman who had a fruit of immortality gave it to king Bhartrhari, who then passed it to his queen, who gave it to her lover, who gave it to one of his mistresses, who, in the end, presented it again to the king. After reflecting for a time on this chain of events, the king cursed all women and retired to the forest. This story appears to be summed up in the first verse given in this translation from *Satakatraya* by D.D. Kosambi.

She who is the constant object of my thought
Is indifferent to me,
Is desirous of another man,
Who in his turn adores some other woman,
But this woman takes delight in me . . .
Damn her! Damn him! The God of love!
The other woman! And Myself!

For an instant he is a child,
For an instant a youth delighting in passion,
For an instant he is a pauper,
For an instant fat in prosperity,
Then, like an actor,
With withered limbs of old age
His body covered with wrinkles,
A man at the end of his worldly existence
Falls at the curtain to death.

When darkness of passion wove
a web of ignorance about me,
then a woman seemed
To fill the world's expanse.
But now that I am favoured with the salve
of keener discernment,
My tranquil sight sees Brahman

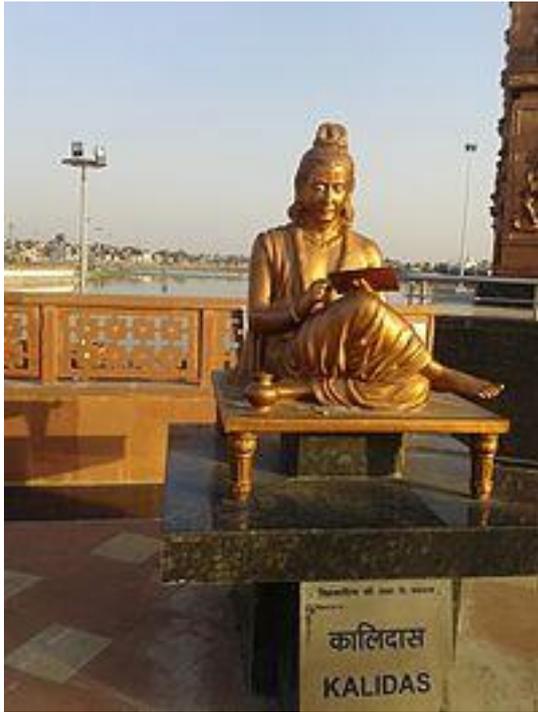
Ubiquitous in the world.

A man may tear a jewel
From a sea monster's jaws,
Cross a tumultuous sea
Of raging tides,
Or twine garland-wise
A wrathful serpent on his head.
But no man can alter
The thoughts of an obstinate fool

It eludes the pillage of thieves
Promotes endless joy
Bestowed on those who beg,
It waxes greater yet
An perishes not despite the end of time
Wisdom is a treasure deep within
Kings, renounce your arrogance
Towards its masters!
Who can rival them?

3. *Sisupala Vadha* *Sisupala Vadha* ('The Slaying of Sisupala'), a long poem written by Magha (7th c. CE), is a critics' favourite among the classics of Sanskrit poetry. It tells a story taken from the mythology of Krishna in which he kills an enemy king named Sisupala. Unlike other poems, such as those by Kalidasa, however, its reputation rests not on its storytelling (which is incoherent) or beauty (which it lacks), but on its sheer linguistic ingenuity. For instance, in a masterful (or possibly arrogant) display of his skill, Magha composed some verses using only one consonant. Sometimes, though, he admits defeat and falls back on two consonants. The poet also practically invented an eccentric form of verse called 'valid in every way' (*sarvato bhadra*), which uses a combination of syllabic palindromes and acrostics. In this kind of verse, the first four syllables of the first line are the same as the first syllables of each of the other lines and in the same order. The first four syllables of the second line are the same as the second syllables of each of the other lines...and so forth

The story itself is well-known from many sources, primarily the *Mahabharata*. Sisupala is born with three eyes and four arms. He is nearly abandoned at birth, but his parents are warned not to because he will achieve great things. When Krishna takes the baby in his arms, the extra eye and limbs disappear, but it is foretold that Krishna will also kill him. The two become enemies when Krishna steals the woman he had hoped to marry. Sisupala then begins to insult Krishna, and after committing one hundred and one similar crimes, Krishna kills him.



(statue of Kalidas or Kalidasa, date unknown)



(Krishna, left, cuts off the head of Sisupala, painting on glass, Mysore, 18th century)

Reading

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