

CLASSICAL SANSKRIT PROSE LITERATURE

Overview It is sometimes difficult to separate poetry from prose in early Indian literature since many texts are composed in a combination of both; however, we can usually identify a work by its predominate style and its primary purpose, whether to please through language or through narrative. Even then, we have 'narrative poems' such as the famous *Kathasaritsagara*, which is discussed in a separate essay. In this essay, we will focus on four famous prose narratives that appeared within about one hundred years of each other, in the 6th and 7th centuries CE. Taken as a set, they mark a significant advance in storytelling in Indian literature. These texts are often called 'romances' or 'adventure stories,' labels that are not misleading. One, *Kadambari*, is typically said to be the first 'novel' in Indian literature, though this claim does not account for the distinctive tone and perspective of the truly first novels written more than a millennium later, at the end of the nineteenth century. On the other hand, it is true that the *Dasakumaracarita* ('Adventures of the Ten Princes') displays a level of psychological insight into characters' motives that would be admirable in any modern novelist. Overall, however, it is important to note that these early prose narratives represent a sophisticated written form based on oral storytelling. Certainly, many of the characters, motifs and plot elements in the four narratives are borrowed from folk tales, legends and myths that had been told for many centuries before these stories appeared sometime after 500 CE.

History The earliest surviving examples of Sanskrit prose are found in later Vedic literature known as the *Brahmanas* (c. 900 BCE), which narrates the story of Pururavas and Urvashi (the subject of one of Kalidasa's later plays). There are also prose passages in the *Jatakas* and *Panchatantra*, composed closer to the turn of the Christian Era. Some early texts, such as Patanjali's grammatical commentary (2nd c. BCE), refer to prose works, but they have not survived. The next stepping stone in tracing the evolution of Sanskrit prose is an inscription on a stone pillar near Allahabad dated to 350 CE, which praises the exploits of a Gupta ruler.



(stone pillar at Allahabad, 1870)

However, prose storytelling in Sanskrit only developed into a fully formed genre in the 6th and 7th centuries CE by a trio of accomplished writers: writers: Dandin, Bana and Subandhu. While the first two are well-known (extracts from their works are presented below), Subandhu also contributed to the development of prose narrative through his only surviving work, *Vasavadatta*, which is a romance that describes the vicissitudes of the love of its eponymous heroine for a prince. While lacking the storytelling skills of Dandin and Bana, Subandhu did write memorable descriptions, obviously borrowed from poetic genres of the time. Also like his fellow prose authors, however, his long-winded sentences sometimes run to more than two pages.

Cultural Significance These early prose narratives in Sanskrit are not as widely known nor as highly praised as the poetry and drama written (primarily by Kalidasa) a century or two earlier during the Gupta dynasty. Ironically, this may be partly explained by the fact that these romances and adventures employ the overwrought ornamentation of the *kavya* style of the poems, but without their concision of expression. In other words, while these authors found a new form with which to tell a story, they had not yet developed a language suitable for it. For this reason, even the best of these texts, say, for instance, Dandin's 'Adventures of the Ten Princes,' do not read well, at least, in translation. Despite these limitations, these early prose narratives are important for both literary and historical considerations. First, amid the mythic, mystical and magical emphases of most Indian literature at the time, these prose works in Sanskrit initiated a trend in more realistic storytelling that culminated in the modern novel some thirteen centuries later. Second, and because they are told in a more realistic manner, they provide us with invaluable information about the culture and society of the period just before the coming of Islam to the subcontinent. From these works, for instance, readers can gain glimpses of street life in the towns and cities, intrigues at court and agricultural practices in the countryside. Sometimes, we find fascinating details about specific topics, such as the silk weaving industry and the types of weapons used in war.

Writers

Dandin Dandin seems to have lived in the late 6th and early 7th centuries CE (although some scholars put him a century later). Born in a Brahmin family of poets, he spent his most active years in the city of Kanchipuram, the capital of the Pallava dynasty in south India. In his autobiography, he claims to be the grandson of a court poet who served other Pallava kings. Dandin says that he lost both his parents at an early age, prompting him to take up an itinerant life. In addition to the 'Adventures of the Ten Princes,' he also composed an incomplete prose work (*Avantisundari*) and a poetic manual (*Kavyadarsa*).

Bana Bana also seems to have lived a colourful life. Like Dandin, he was born into a high-status Brahmin family and then lost both his parents at an early age. And, yet again like Dandin, he then led a nomadic life for many years, wandering in the company of two half-brothers, a snake doctor, a goldsmith, a gambler and a musician. He was, however, able to retain his family's inheritance and returned to his home town, where he married and was later summoned to the court of King Harsha (r. 606-646), who commissioned him to write his biography (*Harshacarita*). His other major work is *Kadambari*.

Subandhu Almost nothing is known about the life of Subandhu. His name is mentioned in works by other authors, which enables scholars to believe that he lived in the first half of the 7th century CE. His only surviving work is the *Vasavadatta*.

Texts and translations

1. Dasakumaracarita *Dasakumaracarita* ('Adventures of the Ten Princes') is perhaps the best-known and certainly the most accomplished and impressive of the prose works composed in Sanskrit in the pre-modern era. Written by Dandin (from south India) in the 7th century CE, it is a collection of exciting tales held together by a frame-story that reveals its debt to oral tradition. The language of the *Dasakumaracarita* is comparatively uncomplicated. Extended compounds are numerous (the lasting effect of the ornamentation so loved by the classical poets), but the incredibly long, page-filling sentences of other writers in the period are absent.

The tales of the ten princes themselves are mostly secular, often amoral and usually humorous, and in this respect they resemble Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*. The characters are sharply drawn, and much of the interest in the story lies in the realistic treatment of the people with whom the ten princes interact. Again, like Chaucer, we are introduced to greedy merchants, sweet prostitutes, wild hill people, cunning thieves, loyal peasants and mad professors.

A brief synopsis of the story is that ten young men, led by the heir to the throne of an exiled monarch, set off on a journey but become separated and wander in different directions, north and south (not unlike the author himself who was forced to leave his native city of Kanchipuram, not far from present-day Madras, and spent twelve years 'on the road'). When the youths regroup, they recount their adventures, which become the core of the story. One of the unique features of the story, then, is its geographical scope, which spans the whole of the subcontinent, and its sociological breadth, which

includes encounters with all strata of society. In addition to its worldly wisdom, the storytelling is impressive in its attention to details of the material world, the exact ingredients used for cooking a fish curry, for example. Unlike the erotic flavour of most of the contemporaneous poetry, this romance speaks of human love with tenderness. And Dandin often uses the well-known tropes of classical poetry in a clever way, as when he subverts the convention of comparing a woman's beauty with that of nature: 'Her lips were not the subject of pale reflected comparison: they could not be likened to the red *bimba* fruit because they were the redder of the two.' In another, humorous reference to lips, Dandin explains that one of his prince-narrators is unable to speak clearly because during the previous night his lover had nibbled his lips so much that he can hardly move them. As a result, his story is told without using any labial consonants, such as 'p' and 'b.' Finally, if there is a moral to be plucked from these exciting tales, it might be a world-weary resignation to destiny. No matter what the privileged princes and wealthy kings may accomplish, their achievements are nothing more than 'a bubble of water; like a flash of lightning it is born and then destroyed all in an instant...Reconcile yourself to your destiny. Do not worry, but simply bide your time a while.'

Spoken by a wife to her husband, the king, this advice has more than a hint of Buddhist philosophy about it, which accounts for the unverified belief that Dandin himself was a Buddhist.

A. In this first extract from *Dasakumaracarita* (translated by P.W. Jacob, 1892), we follow the adventures of Matanga, a Brahmin who accompanies one of the princes. In the space of a few pages, we have wanderings, secret messages, transformations, a beautiful woman with a destiny, a marriage, a magic jewel and, finally, a festival.

Meanwhile, the rest of the party, uneasy at the disappearance of the prince, sought for him all over the forest, and not finding him, determined to disperse, and continue the search in different countries; and having arranged where to meet again, took leave of each other, and set out separately in different directions.

Matanga [a Brahmin], entirely believing the vision, and rendered still more confident by the companionship of the prince, fearlessly entered the cavern, found the copper plate and read the words engraved on it. Following the directions therein contained, they went on in darkness, groping their way through long passages, till at last they saw light before them and arrived at the subterranean country of Patala.

After walking some distance further, they came to a small lake, surrounded by trees, with a city in view. Here they stopped, and Matanga begging the prince to watch and guard against interruption, collected a quantity of wood and lighted a large fire, into which he threw himself with many charms and incantations, and presently came forth with a new body full of youth, beauty, and vigour, to the great astonishment of his companion.

Hardly was this change effected, when they saw coming towards them from the city a procession, headed by a beautiful young lady splendidly dressed, and adorned with very costly jewels. Approaching Matanga, she made a low obeisance, and, without speaking, put a very precious gem into his hand. Being questioned by him, she answered, with tears in her eyes and in a soft musical voice, "O excellent brahman, I am the daughter of a chief of Asuras, and my name is Kalindf; my father, the ruler of this subterranean world, was slain by Vishnu whom he had offended, and as he had no son, I was left his heir and successor, and suffered great distress and perplexity.

"Some time ago I consulted a very holy Siddha, who had compassion on me, and told me, 'After a time, a certain mortal, having a heavenly body, will come down here from the upper world; he will become your husband, and reign prosperously with you over all Patala'.

"Trusting to this prophecy, I have waited impatiently, longing for your coming as a flower longs for rain, and am now come, with the consent of my ministers and people, to offer you my hand and kingdom."

Matanga, delighted at such a speedy fulfilment of the promise given in the vision, gladly accepted her offer, and with the approbation of his companion, was soon afterwards married to her amid great festivity.

Rajavahana was treated with great respect and kindness by Matanga and his bride; but after seeing all the wonders of the place, his curiosity was satisfied, and he was desirous of returning to the upper world.

At his departure, a magic jewel was given him by Kalindf, which had the power of keeping off from the possessor of it hunger, thirst, fatigue, and other discomforts; and Matanga accompanied him for a part of the way. Walking through darkness as before, the prince at last reached the mouth of the cavern and came forth into the open air.

Having missed all his companions, he was uncertain where to direct his steps, and wandered on till he came to a large park, outside a city, where a great concourse of people was assembled, and he there sat down to rest.

As he sat watching the various groups, he saw a young man enter the park, accompanied by a lady and followed by a numerous retinue, and they both got into one of the swings placed there for the amusement of the festive crowd.

B. This second extract from *Dasakumaracarita* (translated by A.L. Basham, 1968) provides us with an example of the narrative details that fill this text.

When this was done, she put the grains of rice in a shallow wide-mouthed, round-bellied mortar, took a long and heavy pestle of acacia-wood, its head shod with a plate of iron. With skill and grace she exerted her arms, as the grains jumped up and down in the mortar. Repeatedly, she stirred them and pressed them down with her fingers; then she shook the grains in a winnowing basket to remove the beards, rinse them several times, worshipped the hearth, and place them in water which had been five times brought to the boil. When the rice softened, bubbled and swelled, she drew the embers of the fire together, put a lid on the cooking pot, and strained off the gruel.

2. *Kadambari* Although also composed in the 7th century CE, *Kadambari* is a different kind of prose narrative to that of the 'Ten Princes.' It was written by Bana (also called Banabhata), who was court poet to King Harsha, and completed by his son. It is a romantic tale narrated through a sequence of loosely linked scenes decorated with elaborate figures of speech. However, and like the 'Ten Princes,' *Kadambari* (named after its heroine) has a strong narrative drive, involving an intricate and inventive plot, which indulges in multiple sets of separated lovers, past lives, talking parrots, apparent deaths and miraculous resurrections. Many of these plot elements appear to have been borrowed from the *Brihatkatha* (a collection of stories that has not survived but is mentioned in several texts). Whether or not we consider this as the 'first Indian novel' depends very much on our understanding of that genre. However, it is interesting that both Marathi and Kannada (two of India's major literary languages) used the word *kadambari* as a genre label for 'novel.' The plot, too complex even to summarise here, involves two heroines, each of whom is reborn twice. Let us just say that the story begins with a learned parrot who narrates story he heard from a Brahmin and ends another parrot taking human shape to claim his long-lost love.

Below is an extract from *Kadambari*, translated by C.M Riding, 1896. It is characteristic in its detailed and drawn-out descriptions of female beauty and use of familiar similes and epithets.

When the thousand-rayed sun, bursting open the young lotus-buds, had not long risen, though it had lost somewhat the pinkness of dawn, a portress approached the king in his hall of audience, and humbly addressed him. Her form was lovely, yet awe-inspiring, and with the scimitar (a weapon rarely worn by women) hanging at her left side, was like a sandal-tree girt by a snake. Her bosom glistened with rich sandal ointment like the heavenly Ganges when the frontal-bone of Airavata rises from its waters. The chiefs bent before her seemed, by her reflection on their crests, to bear her on their foreheads as a royal command in human form. Like autumn, she was robed in the whiteness of hamsas; like the blade of Paraçurama she held the circle of kings in submission; like the forest land of the Vindhya, she bore her wand, and she seemed the very guardian-goddess of the realm. Placing on the ground her lotus hand and knee, she thus spake: 'Sire, there stands at the gate a Caṇḍala maiden from the South, a royal glory of the race of that Triçamku who climbed the sky, but fell from it at the murmur of wrathful Indra. She bears a parrot in a cage, and bids me thus hail your majesty:

“Sire, thou, like the ocean, art alone worthy to receive the treasures of the whole earth. In the thought that this bird is a marvel, and the treasure of the whole earth, I bring it to lay at thy feet, and desire to behold thee.” Thou, O king, hast heard her message, and must decide! So saying, she ended her speech. The king, whose curiosity was aroused, looked at the chiefs around him, and with the words ‘Why not? Bid her enter’, he gave his permission.

Then the portress, immediately on the king’s order, ushered in the Caṇḍala maiden. And she entered and beheld the king in the midst of a thousand chiefs, like golden-peaked Meru in the midst of the noble mountains crouching together in fear of Indra’s thunderbolt; or, in that the brightness of the jewels scattered on his dress almost concealed his form, like a day of storm, whereon the eight quarters of the globe are covered by Indra’s thousand bows. He was sitting on a couch studded with moon-stones, beneath a small silken canopy, white as the foam of the rivers of heaven, with its four jewel-encrusted pillars joined by golden chains, and entwined with a rope of large pearls. Many cowries with golden handles waved around him; his left foot rested on a footstool of crystal that was like the moon bent in humiliation before the flashing beauty of his countenance, and was adorned by the brightness of his feet, which yet were tinged with blue from the light rays of the sapphire pavement, as though darkened by the sighs of his conquered foes.

3. *Harshacarita* Bana’s other literary achievement was to have written a valuable biography of Harsha, who ruled most of north India from 606-647 CE. More than just a telling of this king’s life, in whose court he was the royal poet, the *Harshacarita* is also a rich historical chronicle of 7th- century north India. Even allowing for some hagiographical tendencies and its ornate style (influenced by contemporaneous poetry), the text is written with tremendous vigour and displays a keen eye for detail. Only the second oldest biography in the history of Indian literature (the first being Asvaghosa’s biography of the Buddha, c. 100 CE), Bana’s text also borrows its overall narrative form from other prose romances and adventures of the period. Like them, it narrates the king’s life-story in a sequence of episodes whose connections are not always clear but which culminate in the hero’s destiny being fulfilled by victory or marriage or both.

Still, the chief value of this biography is its depiction of culture and society in north India before the coming of Islam. This historical, even documentary, quality of the text is illustrated in the two extracts given below. In the first, Bana describes the funeral of a king and the widow’s decision to commit *sati* (self-immolation on the husband’s funeral pyre) in great detail and psychological depth. Even though the son begs his mother not to die, she explains to him that she is resolved to follow the practice. The author then describes the funeral itself. It should be noted that Bana himself, judging from his comments in his romance, *Kadambari*, appears to have opposed *sati*. The second extract is taken from a lengthy description of Harsha’s army striking camp. Here, we should note that, in the original, the entire description (of which this extract is a small portion) is a single sentence, with clause piled upon clause.



(Two sides of a coin, with a portrait of Harsha (left,) and Garuda (right), the eagle with a fan-shaped tail. Garuda was associated with Vishnu, whose cult was patronised by Harsha and later Gupta rulers.)

A. This extract is taken from the *Harshacarita* translated by E B Cowell and F.W. Thomas in 1897. First the mother speaks to her son about her decision to die:

'It is not, dear, that you are unloved, without noble qualities, or deserving to be abandoned. With my very bosom's milk you drank up my heart. If at this hour my regard is not towards you, 'tis that my lord's great condescension comes between us. Furthermore, dear son, I am not, like glory or the earth, dispassionate, a requisite of sovereignty, ever craving for the sight of another lord. I am the lady of a great house, born of a stainless ancestry, one whose virtue is her dower. Have you forgotten that I am the lioness mate of a great spirit, who like a lion had his delight in a hundred battles ? Daughter, spouse, mother of heroes, how otherwise could such a woman as I, whose price was valour, act ?'

Then Bana describes the funeral itself:

In that hour the sun too was bereft of the brilliance which was his life. Ashamed as it were of his own sinfulness involved in the taking of the king's life, he now bent low his face. As if scorched within by a fire of sorrow for the monarch's decease, he assumed a coppery hue. Slowly, slowly he descended from the heavens, as if in compliance with earthly usage to pay a visit of condolence. As though to present an oblation of water to the king, he drew nigh to the western ocean. As soon as the water was presented, his thousand hands became red as if burnt in sorrow's flame.

With radiance thus subdued, as if the mighty emperor's death had brought on a deep distaste for life and colour, the light-crowned god entered the hollows of the mountain caves. Cool grew his heat, as though moistened by the gathering storm of the people's tears. The world assumed a lurid tinge, as if from the colour of all humanity's tear-flushed eyes. The day grew black, as if scorched by the heat of countless people's burning sighs. From the day-lotuses their glory departed, as though it had started to follow the king. As the shadows passed on, the earth became dark as with grief for her lord. Like the heirs of noble houses, abandoning their wives, resorted with piteous cries to the outskirts of the water.

Alarmed as it were at their widowhood, the lotuses hid their treasure chambers. The red glow oozed away, like a bloody flow from the sky-queens' bursting hearts. In due course the lord of splendour had gone to the other world, leaving only the afterglow behind. Like a banner of the dead, the twilight came all ruddy with a lurid expanse spreading far and wide over the heavens. Dusky streaks, like the lines of black cowrie shell ornaments upon a bier, were seen obstructing the view. A night black in all its quarters was mysteriously built up, like a pyre with black beams of aloe wood. With smiling faces the beautiful night lotuses adorned themselves in ivory-petalled buds and formed for

themselves white garlands of wreathed filaments, like wives
in readiness to follow their lord to death

B. Here we have a description of Harsha's army striking camp. The translation is by A.L. Basham, 1968.

Then it was time to go. The drums rattled, the kettledrums beat joyfully, the trumpets blared, the horns blew, the conches sounded. By degrees the hubbub of the camp grew louder. Officers busily roused the King's courtiers. The sky shook with the din of fast-hammering mallets and drum-sticks. The general assembled the ranks of the subordinate officers. The darkness of the night was broken by the glare of a thousand torches which the people lighted. Loves were aroused by the tramping feet of the women who kept watch. The harsh shouts of the elephant-marshals dispelled the slumber of their drowsy riders as awakened elephants left their stables. Squadrons of horses woke from sleep and shook their manes. The camp resounded loudly as spades dug up the tent-pegs, and the tethering chains of elephants clinked as their stakes were pulled up.

Reading

Isabelle Onians, *What Ten Young Men Did*, 2005

A W Ryder, *Dandin's Dasha-kumara-charita: The Ten Princes*, 1927

A K Warder, *Indian Kavya Literature*, 1992

Padmini Rajappa, *Kadambari*, 2010