

# INDIAN ESSAY— Postclassical Period

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## Contents

Part I : Early Postclassical Period

Part II : Late Postclassical Period

## Early Postclassical Essay

### Overview

**Genre** As always, it is difficult to match Indian genres with Western genres. In the case of the ‘essay’ (itself a relatively new term), there is more than the usual mismatch. Classical Indian literature includes a great deal of ‘commentary’, and some ‘discourse’ or ‘treatise’ but none of what we would think of as an individual author presenting a personal argument. Rather a scholar, named or not, adds to a tradition by interpretation of older texts, in a chain, so that the end is really commentaries on commentaries. The Sanskrit genre of *bhasya* translates well as ‘commentary’, while the Tamil term *urai* refers to ‘commentary’ as well as ‘discourse’ or ‘treatise.’

**Texts** This period produced significant works of commentary in Sanskrit and Tamil. In both traditions, prose gradually began to dominate, although an entirely prose text was still rare. However, this was a period of intense philosophical and religious debate, and scholars used commentaries and treatises to advance their particular argument. We have a variety of Hindu schools of thought defined and refined through commentaries, a Tamil literary culture canonised through commentaries, a south Indian Jain culture articulated through maxims and a south Indian Buddhist culture promoted through a grammar.

### Sanskrit

**Astrology** Indian astrology (allied with mathematics) produced a number of important texts during this period. The most far-reaching of these is the *Pancha-Siddhantika* by Varāhamihira (505–587 CE), also called Varaha or Mihir, who lived in Ujjain in western India. In true commentarial tradition, this text summarises five earlier astrological texts and provides new information, such as a precise calculation for the shifting of the equinox (50.32 seconds). Scholars have found traces of Greek astrological thinking in this text, as well as in other astrological texts of this period, including the *BṛhatParāśaraHorāśāstra* and *Sārāvalī*.

**Mathematics** The oldest surviving Sanskrit text on mathematics (*Āryabhaṭīya*) dates from the 6<sup>th</sup> c. CE. A century later the mathematician Bhaskara wrote a commentary (*Āryabhaṭīyabhāṣya*) on this text, in which he describes the Hindu numerical system, including the circle to represent zero.

**Sankara** The Sanskrit commentary tradition produced one of India’s great thinkers during the postclassical period. Sankara was a Brahmin scholar (probably 8<sup>th</sup> c. CE) who reinterpreted the Vedic canon in terms of a particular philosophy known as *advaita* (non-dualism). This meant, in short, that the individual soul (*atman*) and the universal reality (*brahman*) are one and the same, and that everything else (the perceptible world) is *maya* or illusion. Non-dualism, as defined by Sankara, continues to this day to be a strong philosophical tradition not only in India, but across the world.

**Works** Sankara wrote (or composed) hundreds of commentaries, on virtually every major Sanskrit text known in his time. His most influential commentary is that on the *Brahma Sutra*, in which he mentions several other (now lost) commentaries on the same text. Equally important, however, for propagating the non-dualist school of philosophy is his interpretation of the *Bhagavad Gita* since this is the most popular Hindu text.

### Tamil

**Commentaries** In the period after 500 CE, Tamil scholars began to compile into anthologies and then write commentaries on the earlier Sangam poems from the classical period. Compilation was not just an act of collection.

The compilers also 'edited' the poems, adding a colophon and (in most cases) a poet's name. One man, Peruntevanar, is credited with the compilation and editing of several of the most famous anthologies.

**Anthologies** Tamil literary tradition recognises three categories of anthology. First, there is a collection known as the *Ettutokai* ('Eight Anthologies'): *Akananuru* ('400 [Poems] on Love'), *Kuruntokai* ('Short Poems'), *Patirrupattu* ('*Ainkurunuru* ('Five Hundred Short [Poems]'), *Narrinai* ('Excellent Poems on Love'), *Parippatal* ('Ten Tens'), *Kalitokai* ('Poems in the *kali* metre') and *Purananuru*, ('400 [Poems] on War'). A second category of anthologies is the *Pattupattu* ('Ten [Narrative] Songs'), which are longer and latter than the eight listed above. Yet a third category, edited and described in this period, is the *Patinēṅkīkanakku* ('Eighteen Minor Works').

**History** These anthologies are the surviving versions of the classical Tamil tradition. It should be noted that even these texts were 'lost' for about a thousand years until a Tamil scholar rediscovered them in manuscript form in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. This man, a Brahmin judge named SwaminathaAiyar, made his life's work the recovery and publication of classical Tamil literature. Without his somewhat serendipitous discovery, we would not today even know of the existence of this tradition of classical poetry.

**Jain:** Two important Tamil texts from this period are the *Nalatiyar* and *PalamoliNannuru*. Both are included in the third anthology listed above ('Eighteen Minor Works'), and both are collections of short maxims in the south Indian Jain tradition. While the surviving texts were compiled sometime in the 6<sup>th</sup> or 7<sup>th</sup> c. CE, they clearly drew on a much earlier tradition. The short proverb-like maxims are in verse, but their didactic intention regarding the moral life resembles the essay.

**Commentary on commentary** One of the seminal works of Tamil literature produced in this period is *IraiyāṅārAkapporu* by Nakkirar (8<sup>th</sup> c.). This is, in effect, Nakkirar's commentary on an earlier commentary by Iraiyanar on classical love poetry. This commentary occupies a central place in the development of Tamil literature and literary culture. First, it is the definitive articulation of the poetics of Sangam poetry, describing and analysing the genre categories ('interior'/love and 'exterior'/war) and the complex theory of the 'interior landscape', in which stages of love are correlated with types of landscape and the natural world. Second, the commentary, despite its frequent use of 'flowery language,' is the first Tamil work entirely in prose (ignoring the quotations from verse). Third, it is an intellectual argument, a scholarly treatise intended for other scholars. Lastly, it is probably the first Tamil work that was originally composed in writing.

**Grammar** An important treatise on grammar and poetics composed in this period is the *Viracoliyam* (9<sup>th</sup>-10<sup>th</sup> c. CE). After the first Tamil grammar in the classical period (*Tolkappiyam*), Tamil scholars had continued to produce a series of grammars. However, *Viracoliyam* is radically different in that it is part of a growing Tamil Buddhist culture. While it conforms to the structure of earlier Tamil grammars, it aligns itself more closely with the rules of Sanskrit grammar, mixing Tamil and Sanskrit terminology along the way. It is also the first Tamil text to define this dual-language style as *mani-pravalam* ('rubies and pearls'), which was common in south India during the much of the postclassical and medieval periods.

### Questions

1. Genres, it is said, are not just labels but conceptual categories. Discuss this with reference to the Indian genre of 'commentary' and the Western 'essay.'
2. The Jain contribution to Indian literature is often marginalised (somewhat understandably given the enormous number of Hindu and Buddhist texts). However, a study of Jain literature brings up interesting angles on a tradition that we think we understood. Follow the trail of Jain literature by studying one or two key figures.
3. Grammars are incredibly important in both the Tamil and Sanskrit literary traditions. Why is this? Is the primacy of grammars found in any other world literature?

### Reading

J. Gonda (ed.), *A History of Indian Literature*, (Otto Harrasowitz, 1974-1983).  
KamilZvebil, *Tamil Literature* (Brill, 1975)

Kamil Zvelebil, *The Smile of Murugan: on Tamil Literature of South India* (Brill, 1973)

Anne Monius, *Imagining a Place for Buddhism: Literary Culture and Religious Community in Tamil-Speaking South India* (Oxford, 1999)

## LATE POSTCLASSICAL PERIOD

### Overview

During this period, essay writing developed along three tracks. The first two were parallel and largely situated in south India. First, the Tamil commentarial tradition continued to flourish under the Cholaempire (9<sup>th</sup>-13<sup>th</sup> c. CE). These works, reflecting both wit and learning, are important as the (still poorly-understood) reservoir from which modern Tamil prose emerged. The second track of the essay, involving some of the same personnel, was the scholarly treatise. Again this occurred mostly in south India, where Sanskrit and Tamil scholarship converged in monasteries (*mathas*), and again with Chola patronage, especially under Rajaraja I and Rajendra I. A third, and unrelated, development of the essay was Indo-Persian historiography.

### Commentary: Tamil

**Atiyarkkunallar** Atiyarkkunallar (12<sup>th</sup> or 13<sup>th</sup> c. CE) wrote a subtle, though unfortunately incomplete, commentary on the earlier Tamil epic *Cilapatikkarm*. In this commentary, Atiyarkkunallar provides a new categorisation of Tamil poetry based on metrical structure and narrative contents. He also supplies quotations (from now lost works) that have enabled scholars to reconstruct the earliest phases of Tamil literary history.

**Parimelalakar** Considered the ‘prince’ of Tamil commentators, Parimelalakar was born a century later. Drawing heavily on Sanskrit sources, which enriched his grasp of poetics, he wrote two famous commentaries, one on the *Tirukkural* (collection of Jain-inspired maxims) and a second on *Paripattal* (an early collection of Tamil classical poetry). Later writers have admired Parimelalakar’s persuasive argumentation put forward in his concise and forceful sentences.

**Nakkinarkkiniyar** The last of the great, medieval Tamil commentators, and possibly the greatest, was Nakkinarkkiniyar. A near-contemporary of Parimelalakar, he produced glosses and interpretations of many of the most famous works of classical Tamil poetry. All of his commentaries shine with a brilliance of thought and vividness of language.

### Commentary: Indo-Persian

Commentaries on the Qur’an had been produced in Arabic and Persian in the centuries before Muslim rule in India, and these were then drawn upon to compile more commentaries during the rule of the Delhi Sultanate. A well-known example is *Miftah al-Jinan* composed by Muhammad MujirWajibAdib (14<sup>th</sup> c. CE?), who was a disciple of the Sufi saint Nasirud-din Chiragh of Delhi. The simple prose of his text, based on repetitions of basic Muslim tenets and practices, is perhaps explained by the fact that its audience were recently converted Muslims in India.

### Scholarly treatise

**Convergence** During these five centuries, there was a fruitful convergence between Tamil and Sanskrit scholarly traditions. This occurred when Tamil Brahmins established *mathas* (monasteries), in which high-caste (but non-Brahmin) Tamil scholars interacted with their Brahmin counterparts. They produced scholarly treatises, sometimes in the form of commentaries but with well-defined arguments.

**Ramanuja** Perhaps the single most influential thinker in the history of Hinduism was Ramanuja, a Tamil Brahmin who lived in the 11<sup>th</sup> century CE. He challenged the non-dualism (*advaita*) philosophy, in which only divine consciousness (*atman/brahman*) is real and all else is illusion (*maya*). Under the influence of devotionalism, in which worshippers had a personalised relationship with the divine (but did not ‘become one’ with it), Ramanuja promoted a philosophy of ‘qualified non-dualism’ (*vishishtadvaita*), also known as Srivaishnavism, since it focused on Visnu. He articulated this subtle school of thought in a number of commentaries on major Hindu texts.

**Vedanta Desika** Ramanuja's thought was further elaborated in a series of texts written by another Tamil Brahmin scholar, Vedanta Desika (14<sup>th</sup> c. CE). His genius was to write in both Tamil and Sanskrit, and in a mixture of the two, as evident in his masterpiece, '*Garland of the Nine Jewels*' (*Navamanimalai*).

**Madhvacharya** The qualified non-dualism of these two thinkers was rejected by another south Indian Sanskrit scholar named Madhvacharya (14<sup>th</sup> c. CE), who set forth a new interpretation of Hindu scripture called 'dualism' (*dvaita*). Like his philosophic adversaries, Madhvacharya wrote voluminously, commenting and reinterpreting Hindu canonical texts to demonstrate that both the *atman* and the *brahman* are real. His most influential text, however, is probably a commentary on the *Bhagavad Gita*.

**Vallabhacharya** Yet another refinement of this philosophy was articulated by Vallabhacharya (15<sup>th</sup> c. CE), a south Indian (Telugu) Brahmin living in north India. His philosophy is often called 'pure non-dualism,' that is, non-dualism unaffected by illusion (*maya*). Although complex, his ideas are set forth in relatively simple prose in a series of texts (*ShodashGranthas*) designed to answer questions from disciples and spread his teaching to new converts.

**Meykantar** During the same time as these Visnu-oriented philosophical debates occurred, a new philosophical school arose that focused on Siva. Although it drew on earlier devotional songs, this school of Saiva Siddhanta ('Perfected Saivism') was formulated first by Meykantar (13<sup>th</sup> c. CE). Again, this new school grew out of the intellectual combination of Sanskrit and Tamil traditions in the monasteries. Meykantar, a non-Brahmin from a cultivator caste, announced this departure with his famous text, *Civajnanapotam*. His position was firmly dualistic, claiming that both the soul and the material world are real, but that release was possible only through deep meditation on Siva and his *sakti* ('power', manifest in the goddess).

### Indo-Persian Historiography

**Types** During the 13<sup>th</sup> to 15<sup>th</sup> centuries CE, three different types of historical writing were developed by Indo-Persian writers. The first might be called 'artistic', in which poems and ornate language are used to narrate historical events. A second type is didactic history, which sought to interpret events in order to proclaim certain moral truths. A third type was 'universal' in that it attempted to tell the full story of human history.

**Artistic** Writing an historical chronicle in Persian verse was a favourite form for Indo-Persian scholars, who drew on the earlier tradition of praising kings/patrons in a *qasida* ('ode'). Nonetheless, it required skill and patience to extend these short forms to the comprehensive histories written during this period. Examples include *Fotuh al-salatin* (1351) by Abd al-Malek Esami, *Bahman-nama* by Adar and *Sah-nama* by Badr Caci, although this last attribution is uncertain.

**Didactic** A good representative of didactic historiography is Barani, who considered history to be the 'twin' of the *hadith* (sayings of the Prophet). His two major works are the *Tarik-e firuzsahi* (1357) and the undated *Fatawa'-ye jahandari*. The latter is a manual of good governance written as a series of lessons by an historical king to his sons.

**Universal** One of the most comprehensive histories written during this period was the *Tabaqat-e naseri* written by Minhaj al-Seraj (13<sup>th</sup> c. CE) at the court of the Delhi Sultans. It begins with the creation of the world and narrates Muslim history up to the Mongol invasion of Delhi in 1221 CE. As a refuge from the Mongols, the author is understandably biased against the invaders and, in other places, appears to provide more ideas than facts.

### Questions

1. Sanskrit and Tamil have often been presented as divergent, even opposing, literary/scholarly traditions. This characterisation, however, owes more to modern politics than literary history, which tells us that the intellectual exchange between India's two classical traditions is both deep and wide, as evident in the commentaries and treatises mentioned above.
2. Indo-Persian historiography appears to be a transposition of Persian genres to the new territory of Muslim India. What contribution to pre-Muslim literature and culture made to the sudden surge of historiographical writing during the Delhi Sultanate?

## Reading

Peter Hardy, *Historians of Medieval India* (Luzac, 1966)

Bruce B. Lawrence, *Notes from a Distant Flute: The Extant Literature of pre-Mughal Indian Sufism* (Iranian Academy of Philosophy, 1978)

Muzaffar Alam and François Delvoye, and Marc Gaborieau, *The Making of Indo-Persian Culture* (Manohar/Centre De Sciences Humaines, 2000)

John Carman, *The Theology of Rāmānuja: An Essay in Interreligious Understanding* (Yale, 1974)

Eva Wilden, *Between Preservation and Recreation: Tamil Traditions of Commentary* (French Institute, Pondicherry 2009)

Stephen Hopkins, *Singing the Body of God: The Hymns of Vedāntadesika in Their South Indian Tradition* (Oxford, 2002)

## Texts

### 1. From the *Miftah al-Jinan* by Muhammad MujirWajibAdib

It is reported that a man came to the Prophet and said, ‘O Prophet of God, the obligations of Islam are many. Advise me a little of what I should do, in the letter and spirit.’ The Prophet said, ‘Keep your lips moist by repeating God’s name.’

### 2. Atiyarkkunallar’s commentary (second paragraph) on a poetic text (first paragraph)

‘Oh, Sun of burning rays, is my husband a thief?  
He is not a thief, O woman with black fish-shaped eyes.  
Glowing fire will devour this town,’ so said a voice.

Therefore, O Sun with rays, you must know whether my husband is a thief. So she said and he declared standing (there) in a bodiless state, Your husband is not a thief, O woman. Look how this town, which declared him a thief, will be devoured by fire.