

Overview Indian literature began with the ancient oral texts of the Vedas, the bedrock of Hinduism, and now it produces Booker Prize-winning novelists. In addition to the rich corpus of Sanskrit classical literature, India has a second classical tradition in Tamil, beginning in the early centuries of the Common Era. Other major regional literatures appear after 600 CE, and an entirely new element of Persian literary genres and sensibilities was introduced with the coming of Muslim rule to India in about 1000 CE. Historically, probably until the mid-19th century, poetry has been the genre of status, composed at courts, recited at rituals and copied by scribes in manuscripts. Fiction, especially the novel, developed from colonial influences and today dominates Indian literature.

I: INDO-ARYAN CIVILISATION

Poetry

Vedas The four Vedas (Rig, Sama, Yajur and Atharva) were composed in Sanskrit between about 1200 and 900 BCE. The Rig Veda, which is the oldest and most literary of the four Vedas, contains 1028 hymns to be used at sacrifices. The Sama Veda is more abstruse, being a re-arrangement of certain verses from the Rig Veda for liturgical purposes. The Yajur Veda, composed probably two centuries after the Rig Veda, is a compilation of verses to be sung by an assistant priest at the sacrifice. The last, the Atharva Veda, is very different from the other three in that it mainly contains charms and imprecations

Composition The Vedas were not written. Vedic literature was composed, performed and transmitted orally, using a complex set of mnemonic techniques, metrical schemes and literary conventions, by a series of poets, over a period of several hundred years. In other words, Vedic literature is speech (indeed, speech is deified as the goddess Vac). This fact cannot be repeated too many times. The Vedas were not read. They were heard.

Metre The metric system of the Vedas, like that of most early and later Indian poetic traditions (and most Indo-European literatures) is measured by long and short syllables and not (as in English) by stress. A syllable was counted as ‘long’ if it contained a long vowel or a short vowel and two consonants. Most of the hymns are arranged in quatrains, although divisions of three and five also exist. Similarly, while the standard metre is iambic, there is considerable variation in metre.

Rig Veda The most literary of the Vedas, the Rig Veda contains 1028 hymns in praise (*ric* means ‘praise’) of various deities, most of whom are not worshipped today but whose stories have been preserved by later myths and epics. The literary brilliance and cultural authority of the Rig Veda lies in vivid imagery, cosmogonic conundrums and dramas enacted by priests, natural forces and the gods.

Creation myths The Rig Veda contains several creation myths. One verse proclaims that sound (the goddess Vac) created the world. (Cf. ‘In the beginning was the word.’) Elsewhere, the world emerges from a primeval sacrifice of a man, who is then divided into four parts corresponding to the four major caste groups. The world also comes out of a ‘golden womb’ as well as a ‘universal egg.’ Later, creation becomes the work of a figure named Prajapati. But where did the original substance come from? ‘How,’ ask the ancient sages, ‘did being evolve from non-being?’ There is no certainty, not even among those ‘who look down on it, in the highest heaven.’ When we ‘read’ these lines in the Rig Veda and feel a quickening of uncertainty, we enter a dialogue about the human condition that stretches back three thousand years.

Prose

Texts From about 900 to 500 BCE, the Indo-Aryans composed three types of mainly prose texts to complement the ritual texts of the Vedas. These three later types of texts, composed orally in Sanskrit (like the earlier ritual texts but in an already distinctly different form of the language) are the Brahmanas, Aranyakas and Upanishads. At the same time, they also include many verses, either as samples to be used in ritual or as quotations from the ritual texts.

Brahmanas The *Brahmanas* are mainly prose explanations of how to perform sacrifices, that is, a sort-of manual to be used by men less learned than the priests. For example, the opening section of the *Chandogya Brahmana*, one of the oldest Brahmanas, lists the hymns to be used during a marriage and at the birth of a child. It also then instructs the user in how to perform the ritual, how to hold one's fingers or how to pronounce the ritual words. This is followed by a short exposition of the social importance of marriage.

Aranyakas The *Aranyakas*, or 'Forest Books,' are less functional and more contemplative, to be used by men toward the end of life when, by convention, they enter the forest for meditation. They are transitional texts, in that they provide a bridge from the ritual and mythology of the four Vedas to the philosophical speculation of the Upanishads. This point is crucial since it parallels the overall shift in Hindu thought from the correct external performance of a ritual to the internalised vision of the ritual. In other words, from action to thought. And from the exuberant and sanguine outlook in the four Vedas to doubt and contemplation in the Upanishads.

Upanishads While there are more than 200 texts bearing the title 'Upanishad' (lit. 'sitting near [a sage]'), only twelve are considered major texts. These major texts were composed over a number of centuries, probably from about 800-300 BCE. Like all early Indian literature, the major Upanishads were orally composed and transmitted; however, tradition maintains that they were created by named sages. The earliest surviving written texts date from about the 14 century AD, although, like other Vedic texts, they were probably written down much earlier.

II CLASSICAL PERIOD

Court Poetry

Sanskrit Classical Sanskrit poetry was dominated by *kavya*, a capacious category that is perhaps best understood as a meta-genre containing several sub-genres. The most common, prominent in Sanskrit court poetry, is the lyric verse devoted to love and longing and using a repertoire of 'adornments' (*alankara*), such as stock epithets, alliterations and metaphors. *Kavya* poets flourished during the Gupta Empire (3rd-5th c. CE). Long poems were called *maha* ('great') *kavya*.

Buddhacarita The *Buddhacarita* ('Life of the Buddha') by Asvaghosa is often recognised as the earliest classical Sanskrit poem. Composed approximately 100 CE as a hagiography of the historical Buddha, it is also composed in one of the simplest Sanskrit metres. Of its 28 chapters, or cantos, only the first 14 are found in extant Sanskrit versions, although complete versions do survive in Chinese and Tibetan.

Kalidasa The most influential classical Sanskrit poet was Kalidasa (5th c. CE), who was patronised by Gupta kings. Kalidasa was prolific. He wrote two long poems or *mahakavyas* (*Kumarasambhava*, 'Birth of the War God Kumara' and *Raghuvamsa*, 'Dynasty of Raghu'), plus a well-loved lyric poem (*Megaduta*, 'The Cloud Messenger') and a still-performed play (*Shakuntala*). He was also a famous playwright.

Bhartrhari Little is known about Bhartrhari, though most scholars believe he lived in the 5th century CE and wrote important Sanskrit texts, such as the *Vākyapadīya* (an original discourse on Sanskrit grammar and philosophy). He is best known, however, for the poems in the *Śatakatraya*, a collection of short verses in which each group is dedicated to a different *rasa* (the distillation of an aesthetic mood in a reader/listener).

Tamil Classical Tamil poetry is known as *cankam* ('academy'), after the academy of poets who, by tradition, composed this corpus of nearly 2,400 poems probably between 100-300 CE. Most of the 473 named poets composed only a single poem, although a few (Kapilar 235 poems and Ammuvanar 127) were prolific. Avvaiyar, one of the few female poets, wrote 59. Unlike the Sanskrit poets of the Gupta court, these Tamil poets were patronised by the rulers of small kingdoms, and many were itinerant. Tamil poetry has two overarching genres: *akam* ('interior') and *puram* ('exterior'). This dichotomy, which refers to both the topographical and psychological dimensions of a poem, may be translated as 'love' and 'war' poems.

Epic Poetry

Mahabharata The Sanskrit *Mahabharata* ('Great War') was composed over a number of centuries. When completed about 400 CE, it had amassed 100,000 couplets (more than 8 times the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* put together). The core of the *Mahabharata*, interspersed with large chunks of didactic and mythological material, is the story of a

dynastic struggle between two groups of cousins: the Pandavas and the Kauravas. While war is the centrepiece, the background is equally important to the dramatic tension. We watch as the cohesion among fraternal kin (a high priority in a patrilineal and patrilocal society like Hindu north India) slowly breaks down. Jealousy, poor judgement, childlessness, a curse, sexual humiliation of a wife and a disastrous game of dice breed animus and lead to the exile of one group by the other.

Ramayana The Sanskrit *Ramayana* ('Way of Rama' or 'Story of Rama') was composed over several centuries (about 200 BCE to 300 CE), drawing on versions of the story circulating in oral tradition. It was thus composed by different poets, but its author is said by tradition to be the legendary sage Valmiki. We thus speak of the *Valmiki Ramayana* because there are hundreds of other versions of the story, and more than 25 in Sanskrit alone. The multiple versions, simple metre and frame story all point to the origins of the Rama story in oral tradition. The core story is the life and adventures of Rama, *avatar* of Visnu and heir to his father's throne.

Cilappatikaram The 'Lay of the Anklet' (*Cilappatikaram*) is an epic composed in Tamil about 500 CE, probably by a Jain monk. Consisting of more than 5,000 verses, it is a tragic story of jealousy, deception, undeserved death and the power of a woman's love. While it bears some similarity to contemporaneous Sanskrit court poetry, especially in its ornate descriptions of place and nature, its deeper message of loss and revenge sets it apart. The heroine, Kannaki, became a popular goddess in Tamil culture, reversing the usual sequence in which a deity becomes a literary figure.

Fiction

Fable Early fiction appeared in this period in the form of short moral stories or fables (known as *nithi katha*). These are generally in prose, although sometimes the 'lesson' itself is in verse. Nearly all these numerous stories began as oral tales before being collected and written down in manuscripts by scribes and scholars. There were two major collections, the *Pancatantra* and the *Jataka*. The collections often use what is called a 'frame-story' to give a narrative coherence to the otherwise disparate tales. These originally oral tales were collected and redacted in manuscript form sometime in the early centuries of the Common Era. Some were composed in Pali, but most were in Sanskrit, although all were eventually written down in every Indian language.

Pancatantra The *Pancatantra* ('Five-Books') is a collection of nearly 100 animal fables. The frame-story is that a pundit instructs three ignorant princes in the art of statecraft, using these moral stories as lessons. The work is divided into five sections, each focusing on an aspect of statecraft, although each has more general significance. The five topics are: The Separation of Friends, The Gaining of Friends, War and Peace, Loss of Gains and ill-Considered Action. Each of these sections is itself introduced by a frame-story, within which animals take turns telling a story.

Jataka The *Jataka* tales are similar to those in the *Pancatantra* (some tales are found in both collections) with the important difference that they were adapted to tell the story of the previous lives of the historical Buddha. In most variants of the text, each tale has a similar structure. First there is a folktale in prose, in which the Buddha-to-be appears as one of the characters, either human or animal. This is then followed by a brief commentary in verse that links the story to an aspect of the Buddha's teaching

Drama

Early texts Fragments of a drama by Asvaghosa date from the 1st c. CE, although it seems likely that dramatic performance must have occurred earlier. Two early Sanskrit texts, the *Mahabhasya* ('Great Commentary [on grammar]') and the *Nāṭyaśāstra* ('Treatise on Theatre'), from about the same period, provide evidence of a developed drama form. The earliest extant complete plays are those by Bhasa, Kalidasa and Sudraka (all 5th c. CE).

Greek influence Some scholars have detected Greek influence in early Indian drama, arguing that plays enacted at the courts of Indo-Greek kings (c. 250 BCE-50 CE) inspired Indian poets to develop their own form. Indeed, the curtain that divided the stage is called *yavanika* (from the Sanskrit word for 'Greek'). The famous 'Clay Cart' (see below) also bears a superficial resemblance to the late Greek comedy of the school of Menander.

Content Classical Indian drama, like most of Indian literature, did not hold with tragedy. Heroes and heroines might suffer defeat and loss, but a happy ending was not far away. There was, however, sufficient melodrama to satisfy the emotional needs of the audience. Innocent men are led toward execution, chaste wives are driven from their homes and children are separated from their loving parents.

Bhasa Very little is known about Bhasa, the earliest (and arguably the greatest) of the classical playwrights. He is dated between 200 BCE and 200 CE, and all that is certain is that he pre-dated Kalidasa and that 13 plays are attributed to him. Many of those plays retell episodes from the *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata*, and some are tragedies, which was unusual in classical Indian theatre. For example, the *Pratima Nataka* tells the story of Kaikeyi from the *Ramayana*, usually considered the evil step-mother responsible for the sufferings of Rama and his father. Bhasa, however, shows how she herself suffered from her guilt.

Kalidasa The best-known playwright of the classical period is Kalidasa (5th c. CE), whose fame rests also on his poetry. Three of his plays have survived: *Malavika and Agnimitra* (a palace intrigue), *Urvashi Won by Valor* (the Vedic story of Urvashi) and *The Recognition of Shakuntala*. This last has always been considered his finest work and is still performed today, around the world.

Sudraka The only other surviving play of significance in this period is *Mṛcchakaṭika* ('The Little Clay Cart') written by Sudraka, a contemporary of Kalidasa. This story is one of the most realistic and the plot one of the most complicated in the large corpus of classical Sanskrit literature. The central narrative concerns a love affair between a poor Brahmin (whose son can only have a little clay cart instead of grander toys) and a virtuous courtesan, but quickly moves into political intrigue, stolen jewels, a vivid court scene and the overthrow of a wicked king. With this moving story, 'The Little Clay Cart' is the most easily appreciated of classical dramas.