

# INDIAN LITERATURE – Early Post-Classical

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## SANSKRIT POETRY

### Overview

Two major developments occurred in Sanskrit literature during the early postclassical period. The first is the composition and diffusion of Hindu myths, under the influence of devotionalism. The second is the continuation of the *kavya* tradition, especially *maha* ('great') *kavya* poems, which themselves are influenced by the rise of devotionalism.

### Myth

**Genre** While there is no precise literary genre that corresponds to the (perpetually misunderstood) Western category of 'myth,' most of what we would consider mythic is contained somewhere in the vast compendia of the *puranas* ('old,' 'of old times'). Creation myths were already told in the Vedic texts, and new ones (often variants of earlier versions) were composed during later centuries, right up to the early twentieth century. Unlike the Vedas, however, the myths were never memorised, word-for-word, and many different versions of each myth exist.

**History** As with many Indian literary forms, myths were not created by a single author, written on paper or palm leaf. Instead, these massive texts (ranging from 15,000 to 80,000 verses) drew on earlier and contemporary oral tradition, including the Upanishads, the *Dharma Sastras* and the great Sanskrit epics. In order to control this literary hydra, Sanskrit tradition has compiled a canon of 18 or 20 (depending on how you divide the texts) *maha* ('great') *puranas*, which were written, following earlier oral compositions, from about 250 CE to 900 CE. The oldest surviving myth text (of the *Skanda Purana*) is a Nepalese manuscript dated to 810 CE.

**Function** It is often said that the *puranas* are more a tradition than a text. And as a traditional explanation of everything from the creation of the world to the details of a particular ritual, they are the reference books of Hinduism. If one has a question about anything in the Indian world—an historical event, the genealogy of a king, an astrological calculation or moral dilemma—these wide-ranging compendia provide the answer. Hindus, however, are usually more interested in the ritual efficacy of these mythic texts, their ability to breathe spirit into a stone statue and thus to enable a god or goddess to bestow favours on worshippers. Hindu myths also offer moral guidance, spectacle and, not least of all, entertainment.

**Themes** While the *puranas* do not have a linear narrative, they do circle around core themes. Stories of Visnu focus on the protective powers of his *avatars* (especially Rama), although later myths tell the story of love between Krishna and his consort Radha. The myths of Siva, and his wife (in various forms) and their children, provide the opportunity to domesticate the gods and to generate family drama. Siva himself is a figure of many aspects, including a fascinating dichotomy of the 'erotic-ascetic' (to use Wendy Doniger's phrase). The stories of Visnu, on the other hand, centre largely on his ten incarnations (*avatars*), often in the role of saviour or advisor. If Siva represents power and passion, Visnu embodies grace and salvation.

Devi, the goddess, also has many manifestations. As Kali, she is death. As Siva's wife, Parvati or Uma, she is protection. As Durga, she is the slayer of the buffalo-demon. As Visnu's wife, Lakshmi, she is wealth.

**Etiological myths** Many myths are etiological, that is, they give explanations, usually for the origin or appearance of things. Cosmogonic myths, for example, explain the creation of the world(s), from an egg, primeval ocean or deity. One of the best-known of these etiological myths, in the Saiva corpus, explain how Ganesa got his elephant head. When Parvati was bathing, she told her son to stand guard and prevent anyone from approaching. Siva (Parvati's husband) came near and chopped off the head of his impudent son who dared to order him to stop. The repentant husband then promised his angry wife that he would replace their son's head with the first one he could find. And that first head was on an elephant.

### Kavya

**Post-Kalidasa** Following Kalidasa, the great exponent of classical Sanskrit poetry and drama during the Gupta Empire, Sanskrit poets continued to experiment. In particular, Kalidasa's successors wrote accomplished works in the *mahakavya* genre (which Kalidasa himself had perfected), usually by reworking material from the Sanskrit epics. While all these later poets pay homage to Kalidasa, and while most of them write competent and at times original material, they never surpass the master.

**Magha** Perhaps the most highly regarded of Kalidasa's successors was Magha, who lived in the seventh century CE and lived in a small court in Rajasthan. His most enduring work is *Shishupala Vadha*, a *mahākāvya* based on a story in the *Mahabharata*. Magha is much loved by critics and scholars, who praise his technical skills and verbal dexterity in deploying 23 different metres. The imprint of devotionism is evident in this poem, in which the poet glorifies Visnu as the preserver who slays an evil king.

**Other poets** Bhatti (probably 7<sup>th</sup> c. CE) wrote *mahakavyas* based on episodes from the Rama story, the most famous being the *Ravanavadha*. Bharavi (probably 6<sup>th</sup> c. CE and probably from south India) wrote the *Kirātārjunīya*, modelled on earlier tellings of same story from the *Mahabharata* and considered one of the finest of the *mahakavyas*. Bana (7<sup>th</sup> c. CE), who was also a playwright, wrote poems collected under the title *Candisataka*. Kumaradasa (7<sup>th</sup> c. CE) is remembered for his retelling of the 'rape' of Sita (*Janaki-harana*) from the Rama story. Lastly, we should mention Anandavardana, a ninth-century poet from Kashmiri who composed the *Devasataka*.

### Discussion/questions

1. Hindu myths have endured to the present day, depicted in film, television and comic books. What can account for this longevity?
2. Hindu mythology is cognate with other mythologies in the Indo-European world, such as Norse. Compare these two geographically distant mythologies in terms of themes, characters and social function.
3. Some scholars have dismissed the poetry of Kalidasa's successors as merely 'derivative.' Select one major *mahakavya* and read it closely, with another eye on Kalidasa's poetry. Is the dismissal by scholars justified?

### Reading

Wendy Doniger, *Hindu Myths* (Penguin, multiple editions)

Anisile T. Embree, *Sources of Indian Tradition*, Vol. 1 (Columbia, 1988)

J.A.B. van Buitenen, *Classical Hindu Mythology* (Temple University, 1978)

Daniel Ingalls, *Sanskrit Poetry* (Harvard, 2000)

Indira Peterson, *Design and Rhetoric in a Sanskrit Court Epic: the Kirātārjunīya of Bhāravi* (SUNY, 2003)

### Texts

1. From *Shishupala Vadha* by Magh, trans. Subhadra Jha

Then the warrior, winner of war, with his heroic valour, the subduer of the extremely arrogant beings, he who has the brilliance of stars, he who has the brilliance of the vanquisher of fearless elephants, the enemy seated on a chariot, began to fight.

2. From *Kirātārjunīya* by Bharavi, trans. Sampadananda Mishra,

O man who desires war! This is that battlefield which excites even the gods, where the battle is not of words. Here people fight and stake their lives not for themselves but for others. This field is full of herds of maddened elephants. Here those who are eager for battle and even those who are not very eager, have to fight.

## TAMIL POETRY

### Overview

Tamil poetry during this period is dominated by the emergence of devotionalism (*bhakti*), in which an individual worshipper imagined and nurtured a direct bond with a specific god or goddess. Although devotionalism had antecedents in earlier literature, its flowering in Tamil represents a new poetic expression. Sanskrit could not be the vehicle for expressing this intensely personal sentiment simply because it was a formal, courtly language far removed from what ordinary people spoke. Tamil poets, on the other hand, still wrote in a language that, while more sophisticated than everyday speech, was comprehensible to educated people. A second development in this period was epic poetry, in part derived from Sanskrit models but telling south Indian stories.

### Devotional poetry

**History** We can trace the historical development of devotionalism from the late Upanishads and the epics (especially the *Bhagavad Gita*), but in this period it took a more explicit and exuberant form. By 500 CE, Hinduism had embraced a new religiosity, in which an individual worshipper imagined and nurtured a direct bond with a specific god or goddess. This fundamental shift in Indian culture and literature first surfaced in Tamil and then spread north to the Kannada area (another Dravidian language) and then to every literary language in the sub-continent.

**Gods as kings** As a result of devotionalism, gods replaced the kings of classical Tamil poetry as the object of the poet's attention. The king's palace became the god's temple, and the king's patronage, which kept the bards alive, became the boons given by a god to his devotees. The poet often assumes the role of lover or beloved toward the god. This transition is also evident in one type of poem known as *arruppatai* ('guide'), in which one poet guides another poet to particular destination. Whereas the destination in the classical poems was the court of a generous patron, now the destination is a deity and his temple. The common literary feature of all 'guide' poems is that they allow the poet to describe the natural beauty of the land that leads to the patron god. This skill is most fully developed in the *Tirumuruga Arruppatai* ('Guide Poem to Lord Murugan') by Nakirrar (7<sup>th</sup> c. CE).

**Nayanmars** Tamil bhakti poets who composed songs in praise of Siva were collectively called the Nayanmars ('Servants of the Lord'). They usually focused on a specific form of Siva associated with a specific region, temple or story. Some of their poems have a raw, wounded quality, often literally in the description of bodily mortification. Sometimes that poetic ferocity is directed against Jain and Buddhist scholars, philosophers and mendicants, who had considerable influence in south Indian kingdoms and towns at the time. These songs (often called 'hymns') in praise of Siva were later collected in the *Tirumurai* ('Sacred Way') a 12-volume compendium. From this massive work we know the names of 63 poet-saints who composed thousands of hymns. Another important anthology is *Tiruvacakam* ('Sacred Sayings'), a late (9<sup>th</sup> c. CE) compilation of Siva poems by Manikavacakar. This poet, a councillor at the court of a Pandya court in Madurai, has become one of the best loved of the Saiva saints in Tamil, whose poems are still sung today.

**Stala-puranas** One feature of Saiva devotionalism in Tamil, the specificity of place, also defines the Tamil myths (*puranas*) written in this period. Although these Saiva myths are largely derivative of contemporaneous texts in Sanskrit, the Tamil mythographers did add new material and situate the stories in particular temples. For that reason the 275 Tamil myths are called *stala* ('place') *puranas*. In effect, they are another form of the 'guide' poem, directing worshippers to the many Siva temples that dot the Tamil countryside.

**Alvars** During the same period (roughly 500 CE-900 CE), the Tamil poets who sang devotional songs to Visnu were known as Alvars (lit. 'Deep Ones'). These poets are fewer in number than their Saiva counterparts—only 12 names are recorded—but they produced more than 4,000 poems. The worship of Visnu (the preserver) as opposed to the worship of Siva (the destroyer) is predictably less fierce in tone, less visceral in imagery and less

uncompromising in its sectarian loyalty. As expressed in the Alvars' poetry, the approach to Visnu is a mixture of contemplation, mythological drama and rapturous love.

**Nammalvar** The most prolific and highly regarded of these Vaisnava poet-saints is Nammalvar ('Our Alvar'). Born into a high caste (but not a Brahmin) in the 9<sup>th</sup> century CE, the young man went on pilgrimages to sacred places, including many in north India. Although he died at 35, his poetry was lauded as the 'Fifth Veda' or the 'Tamil Veda', and images of the poet were cast in bronze and installed in major temples in south India.

**Tiruvaymoli** Nammalvar composed more than one thousand poems, which were anthologised a century or so after his death in a collection known as *Tiruvaymoli* ('Sacred Speech'). The verses draw on the mythology of Visnu, especially his ten avatars, but they luxuriate in describing his physical and spiritual characteristics. The thousand poems of the *Tiruvaymoli* are interlinked to make a coherent whole by a unique poetic device: the last syllable of each poem is used as the first syllable of the next poem. The result is a garland of sound and sensibility.

### Epic poetry

While Tamil poets did not favour epic poetry to the same degree that Sanskrit poets did, they did compose several major works. The most famous of these is *Manimekalai* (c. 6-7 c. CE), a Buddhist sequel to the *Cilappatikaram* of the classical period. The eponymous heroine of this latter work is, in fact, the daughter of the hero of the earlier poem. Her mother is a dancing girl at court, who becomes a Buddhist nun when she learns that her former lover has died. The daughter also becomes a nun, and much of the epic is a dialogue between various religious doctrines, in which Buddhism emerges triumphant.

### New genre

A new Tamil genre that developed in this period is the *ula* ('procession'). Again, it shows the influence of devotionalism. Previously, poets described the procession of a king but now they described the procession of a deity. Like the *stala-puranas*, this genre gave full vent to poetic description, this time of a city, with its crowds and different types of people. For this reason, it is often drafted into service by historians of the period, desperate for any social documentation. The earliest known example of this genre is the *Nanavula* by Ceraman Perumal (8<sup>th</sup> c. CE).

### Discussions/questions

1. Tamil poetry during this period is dominated by Hindu devotionalism, but Buddhist and Jain poets also composed major epics. Indeed, the significance of Buddhist and Jain literature to literary culture of south India has never been fully understood.
2. Trace the emergence of devotionalism from its roots in the Upanishads and Sanskrit epics to its expression in Tamil.
3. Read the poems of Nammalvar (see Ramanujan in the reading list below). Some scholars have suggested that his theology is close to that of early Christianity.

### Reading

Norman Cutler, *Songs of Experience: the Poetics of Tamil*

*Devotion* (Indiana, 1987)

A.K. Ramanujan, *Nammalvar: Hymns for the Drowning: Poems for Vishnu* (Penguin, 2005)

David Shulman, *Tamil Temple Myths: Sacrifice and Divine Marriage in the Tamil Saiva Tradition* (Princeton, 2014)

Paula Richman, *Women, Branch Stories, and Religious Rhetoric in a Tamil Buddhist Text* (Syracuse, 1988)

## Texts

### 1. From the poems of Nammalvar, trans. A.K. Ramanujan

We here and that man, this man,  
and that other-in-between,  
and that woman, this woman,  
and that other, whoever,  
those people, and these,  
and these others-in-between,  
this thing, that thing,  
and this other-in-between, whichever,  
all things dying, these, things,  
those things, those others-in-between,  
good things, bad things,  
things that were, that will be,  
being all of them,  
he stands there.

[Note: 'He' in the last line refers to Visnu. Each of the Tamil personal pronouns ('he,' 'she,' and 'it') has three forms: 1) for near the speaker, 2) far away and 3) in the middle. There is also a distinction between 'we' (inclusive) and 'we' (exclusive)].

### 2. From *Tirumurai*, a poem by Appar about Siva

We are not subect to any; we are not afraid of death; we will not suffer in hell; we live in no illusion; we feel elated; we know no ills; we bend to none; it is one happiness for us; there is no sorrow, for we have become servants, once and for all, of the independent Lord, and have become one at his beautiful, flower-covered feet.

## **FICTION**

### Overview

Fiction flourished during this period, in which we find texts that are 'narrative-driven' and begin to resemble modern fiction. Although many texts are dull and pedantic romances, several influential story collections appeared in Sanskrit, Tamil and in the little-understood language of Paisaci. Fiction in Sanskrit used two styles, both considered *kavya*, a term commonly associated with classical Sanskrit lyric verse that also encompasses two sub-genres of fiction storytelling.

One could be called 'narrative poetry' because it uses easy but polished verse. The other could be called 'poetic prose' because it uses an ornate prose known as *katha*. Tamil fiction continued to use epic poetry, mostly written by Jains, and with a strong emphasis on storytelling.

### Poetic prose: Dandin

**Dasakumaracarita** The most impressive and perhaps influential prose work of this period is Dandin's *Dasakumaracarita* ('The Tales of the Ten Princes'). This entertaining story, written in the 7<sup>th</sup> century CE, is a collection of exciting tales held together by a frame-story, which reveals its debt to oral tradition. The language of the *Dasakumaracarita* is comparatively uncomplicated Sanskrit. Extended compounds are numerous (the lasting effect of the ornamentation so loved by Sanskrit poets), but the incredibly long, page-filling sentences of other writers in the period are absent.

**Contents** The tales of the ten princes themselves are mostly secular, often amoral and usually humorous, a little like the ethos of 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 merchants, prostitutes, wild hill people, thieves, peasants and scholars.

### Poetic prose: Subandhu and Bana

**Subandhu** A contemporary and admirer of Dandin, Subandhu is known for only one surviving work, *Vasavadatta*. This Sanskrit play describes the vicissitudes of the love of its eponymous heroine for a prince. While lacking the storytelling skills of Dandin, this prose author did write memorable descriptions, obviously borrowed from poetic genres of the time. However, his long-winded sentences sometimes run to more than two pages.

**Bana** Bana was the court poet of Harsha, whose kingdom dominated north India in the 7<sup>th</sup> century CE. Bana is known for two prose works: *Kadambari* and *Harshacarita* (the latter is biography and is described elsewhere). *Kadambari* might be seen as a deliberate attempt to improve on Subandhu's text for it, too, is a romance narrated through a sequence of loosely linked scenes told with elaborate figures of speech. It is one of most story-driven texts of premodern India, indulging in a plot of multiple sets of separated lovers, past lives, talking parrots, apparent deaths and miraculous resurrections. Remarkably, the story is incomplete and was only finished by Bana's son, whose prose style does not match that of his father.

### Narrative poetry

The *Brhatkatha* ('The Great Story', 6<sup>th</sup>-7<sup>th</sup> CE?) is one of those paradoxes of Indian literary history: an absent text that is omnipresent. Tradition maintains that this vast collection of stories was written by a little-known Jain monk (Gunaḍhya) in an extinct language (Paisaci) at the court of a kingdom (Sattavahana) whose dates are far from certain. Nevertheless, this now-lost text influenced most subsequent narrative traditions in India, north and south. The most famous of these, in Sanskrit, is the *Kathasaritsagara*, and there are also versions in Pali (the language of Theravada Buddhists), Prakrit, Apabhramsa (a regional dialect of Prakrit) and Tamil.

### Tamil epics

**Perunkatai** The Tamil retelling of the *Brhatkatha* is the *Perunkatai* ('Great Story'). From references to this text in other Tamil sources, we can date it to the 8<sup>th</sup> or 9<sup>th</sup> century CE. It was written by Konkuvelir, obviously a Jain scholar since Jain maxims and terminology are abundant (the original *Brhatkatha* was also written by a Jain). The 16,000 verses use a common Tamil metre (*akaval*). The story told in *Perunkatai* is a loosely connected series of court romances with a religious message. Princes and princesses fall in love, are unfaithful and suffer tragic loss, but manage to fly around in chariots and enjoy the pleasures of affluence. The kingdom, however, declines into chaos, until all is righted when the main characters become Jain monks and nuns. Although the story is not well-constructed, it avoids pure propaganda, and the author draws his characters with skill.

**Civakacintamani** A second, major Tamil narrative epic poem of this period is the *Civakacintamani* ('The Glorious Civaka'). It, too, was written by a Jain scholar (Tirutakkatevar), and it, too, borrows from Sanskrit originals and the *Perunkatai*. In turn, the beauty of its 3000-plus verses influenced the greatest of all Tamil epic poems (the *Ramayana* of Kamban, 12<sup>th</sup> c. CE). The story is one of court intrigue, assassination and a fatherless child. The child is the eponymous Civaka, who wades through a series of love affairs, but eventually avenges his father's death, wins back the kingdom and (like a good Jain hero) renounces the world.

**Nilakeci** Yet another Tamil epic poem by a Jain is *Nilakeci*, a counter-blast to *Kundalakeci*, a lost Buddhist epic poem in Tamil. The *Nilakeci* tells the story of a demoness of the same name, who is known in Tamil folk religion but in this story is converted to Jainism. The nearly 900 stanzas were composed in the 10<sup>th</sup> century CE. The text is interesting primarily for what it reveals about sectarian disputes during the period.

**Culamani** Culamani ('The Crown Jewel') is the fourth Tamil epic composed by a Jain in this period (c. 900 CE). This 2,000-verse work uses existing folk-tale episodes (including the core motif of a prediction that a prince will marry a fairy-princess) to lead up to the predictable ending in which the hero renounces the world and gains release.

### Discussion/questions

1. The Western literary genres of poetry and prose do not easily map onto Indian genres. *Kavya*, the overarching category for several different poetic and prose forms, is a case in point. Does this difference in terminology matter? Is it simply semantics? Or does it reveal a deeper conceptual difference between cultures?

2. Many of the story collections written during this period are rearrangements of earlier texts. What does this literary recycling reveal about Indian literature? Can we still speak of 'creativity' and 'literary skill' in such literature?
3. Each of the four narrative epic poems in Tamil during this period was written by a Jain, and yet it is fair to say that Jain influence is absent in modern Tamil literature. Trace the history of Jainism in south India by following its literary trail.

### Reading

Kamil Zvevibel, *A History of Tamil Literature* (Otto Harrassowitz, 1974)

Donald Nelson, *Brhatkatha studies: the problem of the Ur-text. The Journal of Asian Studies* 37: 4, pp. 673-676 (1978)

J.E.B. Gray, *Dasakumaracarita as picaresque*. In C. Shackle and R. Snell (eds.) *The Indian Narrative: Perspectives and Patterns* (Otto Harrassowitz, 1992).

Moreswhar Ramachandra Kale, *Dasakumaracarita by Dandin* (Motilal Banarsidass, 1993)

Catherine Benton, *God of Desire: Tales of Kamadeva in Sanskrit Story Literature* (SUNY, 2005)

Arshia Sattar, *Tales from the Kathasaritsagara* (Penguin, 1996)

Padmini Rajappa, *Kadambari* (Penguin, India, 2010)

### Text

From *Dasakumaracarita* XI, trans. A.L. Basham

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....

## **DRAMA**

### Overview

In the first half of the early postclassical period, Sanskrit drama maintained a level of excellence, with several plays that are considered worthy of comparison with Kalidasa's masterpieces. By the end, however, the political impetus for much of classical Sanskrit culture had waned and the remaining texts are mediocre. One interesting feature of all these plays, nonetheless, is the intermixing of drama and politics, a combination that, on reflection, seems entirely natural. In south India, drama is virtually absent from the historical record, although inscriptions and other texts do refer to specific titles and playwrights.

### Sanskrit

**Bhavabhuti** Following the high water mark of Sanskrit drama during the time of Kalidasa (5<sup>th</sup> c. CE), the tradition was ably continued by Bhavabhuti (7<sup>th</sup> or 8<sup>th</sup> c. CE). Fortunately, three of his plays have come down to us in more or less complete form: 'Malati and Madhava', *Mahaviracarita* ('The Deeds of the Great Hero') and *Uttaramacarita* ('The Later Deeds of Rama'). The first of these is a melodramatic story, full of incident and terror, in which a heroine is repeatedly rescued from death. The other two texts rework the Rama story. Critics judge Bhavabhuti as inferior to other dramatists of this period in terms of plot and characterisation, while at the same time praising his ability to express sorrow and loss.

**Visakhadatta** Visakhadatta (6<sup>th</sup> c. CE?) wrote plays about politics, although only one entire play and fragments of another have survived. The partial text (*Devichandragupta*, 'The Queen and Chandra Gupta') is an ambitious attempt to tell the story of Chandra Gupta II and his rise to power in the 4<sup>th</sup> century BCE. The other, complete play is the justly famous *Mudraraksasa* ('The Minister's Signet Ring'), which focuses on high-drama intrigue during the same historical period.

**Minister's Signet Ring** The complex plot of this play begins with a plan to overthrow the fourth-century BCE Nanda dynasty and put a Maurya king on the throne. The plotters are successful and divide up the kingdom among themselves, but one key figure is soon poisoned to death, leaving his son to take his place. Now, a minister of the defeated dynasty plots with the son to reclaim the lost territories. The coup gains strength from its alliance with the kings of Persia, Kashmir and Sind, but they are foiled by the clever minister of the Mauryas, who persuades the son to rejoin his side.

**Historicity** The convoluted plot of the *Mudraraksasa* does appear to describe historical events that took place about a thousand years before it was written. Indian and Greek sources tell a roughly similar story of political intrigue, including the usurpation of the Nandas by the Mauryas, and warfare between the Mauryas and the smaller kingdoms in northwest India, which were formed after the departure of Alexander the Great. Here again, we see evidence that Greek tradition may have influenced classical Indian drama.

**Harsha** Politics and drama combined once again in the figure of Harsha, who was both king and playwright. After the fall of the Gupta Empire (4<sup>th</sup>-6<sup>th</sup> c. CE), which patronised much of classical Indian culture, central and north India fragmented into small kingdoms. But then in the early seventh century, Harsha gained control of most of the subcontinent, excluding south India. Three plays are ascribed to Harsha, although they may all be the work of a 'ghost' writer. *Ratnavali* and *Priyadarsika* are both comedies based on the lives of the ladies of the harem, in which the eponymous heroines display wit and charm through banter. The third play, *Nagananda* ('Joy of the Serpents'), is a religious story in which a prince gives his own life in order to stop the sacrifice of snakes to Garuda, a divine bird.

**Decline** With these three playwrights, the legacy of Kalidasa lingered for several centuries, but without further genius eventually declined.

Toward the end of the early postclassical period, Bhatta Narayana (8<sup>th</sup> c. CE?), Murari (9<sup>th</sup> c. CE), Rajasekhara (10<sup>th</sup> c. CE) and Krsnamisra (10<sup>th</sup> c. CE) all continued to write plays, though the dialogue was stilted, the language more and more literary and the texts intended for reading rather than performance. With the advent of Muslim rule in north India, from about 1000 CE, Sanskrit drama became a thing of the past.

### Tamil

**Mattavilasa** *Mattavilasa* ('Drunkards' Gest') is the only Tamil drama that survives from this period. It is a one-act play written by Mahendravarman I, a Pallava king of south India (7<sup>th</sup> c. CE). It is a delightful farce, parodying both Hindu and Buddhist ascetics at a time when conflict between these two sects often resulted in violence. In the play, at least, a drunken Hindu mendicant uses a human skull to drink wine, as well as to collect alms. When it goes missing, he accuses his Buddhist counterpart of stealing it, prompting a series of humorous satirical dialogues. In the end, of course, it turns out that the dog took the bowl.

**Lost plays** Tamil literary tradition and inscriptions suggest that dramas were produced and performed during this period, although no text, not even in fragments, survives. One frequently mentioned play is *Pumpuliyurnatakam* ('Play of Pumpuliyur'), which appears to be a religious play set in the fictional town of Pumpuli. Another is *Rjarajesvaranatakam* ('Play of Rajarajesvara') written by Narayana Bhattitityar in the late 9<sup>th</sup> century CE. The story is based on the life of the famous Chola king Raja Rajesvara and his construction of the temple at his capital, Tanjore.

### Discussion/questions

1. While Kalidasa's successors have generally been regarded as less skilled than the master, others have suggested that this judgement is simply a cliché and not borne out by close textual analysis. Compare one of the later dramas mentioned in this article with one of Kalidasa's dramas and make your judgement.
2. Although the genre of drama (*natakam*) has a long textual history in Tamil, and several inscriptions and commentaries mention plays, no text (with the exception of a single one-act play) has survived from this period. This poses the question of how literary memory functions in the absence of raw material. Consider, for instance, a Shakespearean tradition based entirely on secondary sources.



## Reading

A.L. Basham, *Wonder that was India* (Sidgwick & Jackson, 1982)  
Rachel Van M Baumer and James R. Brandon (eds.), *Sanskrit Theatre in Performance* (Motilal Banarsidass, 1981)  
Farley P. Richmond, India. In Martin Banham (ed.), *The Cambridge Guide to Theatre* (Cambridge, 1998)  
Karthigesu Sivathamby, *Drama in Ancient Tamil Society* (New Century Book House, 1981)

## AUTOBIOGRAPHY

### Overview

Biography and autobiography, in their conventional forms, did not appear in Indian literature until Indo-Persian influences (1000 CE onward) and not in their modern forms until the late eighteenth century. However, pre-modern Indian literature does include a type of life-narrative known in Sanskrit as *carita* ('history') and in Tamil as *caritiram*. This is 'history' as told through the figure of a king, god or saint, which tends toward hagiography. Early examples would include the *Buddha-carita* by Asvoghosa (100-200 CE), versions of the Rama story (often titled *Rama-carita*), *Padma-carita* (10<sup>th</sup> c. CE) and *Dasakumara-carita* (discussed under 'fiction'). There is one extraordinary exception to absence of life-writing in Indian before 1000 CE, and that is the *Harshacarita*.

### Harshacarita

**Author** The *Harschacarita* was written by the well-known poet Bana (7<sup>th</sup> c. CE.), famous for *Kadambari*, a romance in Sanskrit.

What we know of Bana's life is taken from introductory verses to *Kadambari* and the initial sections of *Harschacarita*. This means that the *Harschacarita* is not only the first biography but also the first (fragmentary) autobiography in Indian literature.

**Autobiography** Bana describes his early childhood in a well-to-do Brahmin family, when he lost first his mother and then his father at age 14. During his grief, he was consoled by friends and then took to the itinerant life, visiting various courts and cities in north India. During these years of wandering, he befriended people from all walks of life, including a snake doctor, a gambler, a goldsmith and a musician. He was received at the court of Harsha, whom he offended and was expelled. He returned to his village and took a peaceful life but was recalled to court and was restored to favour. From these varied experiences, Bana seems to have developed his unparalleled ability to create characters from princes to prostitutes. These skills, plus his acute observation of place, make his writing resemble modern literature more than that of his own time.

**Biography** The *Harshacarita* tells the story of king Harsha, who at first disliked the poet but later admitted him to his inner circle. Bana begins his tale with the king's rise to power and recounts his many territorial conquests, especially his resolve to achieve 'world-wide' conquest. From the biography, we learn that Harsha issued a decree that all kings must either submit to his rule or fight him. There is evidently a degree of exaggeration in Bana's description of his royal patron, although the story does follow the main events of Harsha's rule. Historians, understandably, treat Bana's 'history' with some scepticism and also with a good deal of frustration because it ends prematurely.

**Document** Even if the *Harshacarita* glorifies the king's political and military exploits, it is regarded as a reasonably accurate document of various social, administrative and military practices. For example, Bana includes more than one description of *sati*, or self-immolation of a widow. He also speaks in some detail of the various castes and sub-castes of the time. A fascinating topic is the tributary (*samanta*) system of north Indian kingdoms in the post-Gupta era, which Bana explains. Similarly, there are detailed portraits of armies and soldiering (as shown in the text below).

## Discussion/questions

1. At the centre of scholarship concerning the *Harshacarita* is the debate over the extent to which literature can be regarded as historical document. For example, can we use the *Mahabharata* and the *Iliad* as a source for understanding ancient India and Greece?
2. *Carita* is often translated as 'history,' but this is usually qualified by adding 'traditional history' or 'historical narrative.' A similar debate thrives in contemporary Western culture about the category 'historical fiction.' This should make us curious about the development of our own understanding of both 'history' and 'fiction.'

## Reading

E. B. Cowell and F. W. Thomas (trans.), *The Harsha-Carita of Banabhatta* (1897, also online at [archive.org](http://archive.org) and [www.mssu.edu/projectsouthasia/literature](http://www.mssu.edu/projectsouthasia/literature)).

## Text

From *Harshacarita* trans. A.L. Basham

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...

## **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 treatises 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 *Bṛhat Parāśara Horāśāstra* 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 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 anthologies and then write commentaries on earlier poems from the classical period. 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 *Etutokai* ('Eight Anthologies'): *Akananuru* ('400 [Poems] on Love'), *Kuruntokai* ('Short Poems'), *Patirrupattu* ('Ten tens'), *Ainkurunuru* ('Five Hundred Short [Poems]'), *Narrinai* ('Excellent Poems on Love'), *Parippatal* (poems in the *parippatal* metre), *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 *Patinēṅkīḷkanakku* ('Eighteen Minor Works').

**Jain** Two important Tamil texts from this period are the *Nalatiyar* and *Palamoli Nannuru*. 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> century 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 *Iraiyāṅār Akapporu!* 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 classical 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 the hybrid language of *mani-pravalam* ('rubies-pearls'), which was common in south India during the much of the postclassical and medieval periods.

### Discussion/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).

Kamil Zvelebil, *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)