

## Sanskrit Mahākāvya based on the Mahābhārata

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### I. Introduction

“The Mahābhārata, like the Ramayana, is among the greatest, and the earliest epics in the world. In length, it is reportedly, seven times longer than Homer's Odyssey and Iliad put together. What distinguishes it from other such accounts is the fact that it is not just one straightforward story but a collection of discourses, episodes and anecdotes collected from far and wide, spanning aeons, woven around the main story which is short and simple enough. It is about the struggle to the succession of the loyal throne of Hastinapura. When the rightful claimant, Yudhisthira, is denied his inheritance by the incumbent ruler, also his paternal uncle, the blind King Dhritrashtra, at the behest of his greedy and arrogant son Duryodhana and his accomplices, the two cousins engage in battle at Kurukshetra”.<sup>1</sup>

The great Indian epic Mahābhārata has influenced and inspired many Sanskrit poets both classical and modern for composing technical Mahākāvya by using traditional poetic principles. I could collect information about twelve Mahākāvya of this type in Sanskrit. These Mahākāvya mainly attempt to highlight the heroic deeds of the great heroes like Bhiṣma, Arjuna, Karṇa etc. Since these compositions portray the noble characters, the idealistic sketch of their personal traits is apparently visible. This is because of the Sanskrit literary tradition which binds their creative and thinking pattern. The Sanskrit tradition advocates for dhirodāta Nāyaka and the theme based on Ītihāsa. Since the Mahābhārata is considered as an Ītihāsa (history), many Sanskrit poets base their poems on this epic. The Sanskrit poets strictly follow the tradition and do not want to deviate from this for their excessive orthodox attitude. However, these sublime literary works help us in understanding the subtle aspects of the characters and moral dilemmas, their life situations and decision-making processes etc. which help us in our struggling life in the present-day world.

The narratives of the works presented in the traditional style, meter and manner undoubtedly enrich our understanding and give us valuable insights for which we mainly want to churn the Mahābhārata and the great human themes it embodies above all the question of what life means and what we might do to endow it with purpose, within the

inherently ambiguous and painful contexts in which we always find ourselves. Tradition and modernity equally occupy the place in long poems in Sanskrit. The present paper will focus on these literary compositions of Sanskrit poets in depicting the characters like Bhiṣma in its relation to the main narrative of the Mahābhārata.

## II. Kirātārjunīyam

Kirātārjunīya is one of them. It is a court epic poem in eighteen chapters and 1040 verses. The poem's theme is the narrative of the hero Arjuna's combat with the god Shiva in the guise of a hunter, an important episode in the Araṇyaparva (Forest Book) of the Mahābhārata. Kirātārjunīya is celebrated as one of the five masterpieces of the court epic genre. In the Mahābhārata episode on which Bhāravi based his poem, the pandava hero Arjuna performs tapas in a Himalayan Forest in order to win Shiva's favour and obtains the boon of a supernatural weapon from him.

The Pāśupata weapon will help the five Pandava brothers to overcome their cousins, the Kauravas in their just war and regain the kingdom that the Kauravas had taken from them in a rigged dicing match. The drama of the episode turns on the trial Shiva sets for the hero. Disguised as a Kirāta, a hunter from a mountain tribe, Shiva picks a quarrel with Arjuna over the shooting of a boar and tests his courage in combat, ultimately revealing himself and granting him the desire weapon.

The epic narrative illuminates heroic action, sacred duty, and Cosmo-moral order (dharma), self-restraint and austerity, devotion and divine benevolence, core values in the culture of ancient India's Brāhmaṇa and warrior elites and enduring themes in the Hindu tradition. Bhāravi was the first poet to write a court epic on Mahābhārata episode. Kirātārjunīya is also the first full-fledged literary treatment of the narrative of the hero and the hunter, which became a popular theme in south Indian literature and art after the seventh century.

### Indira Peterson rightly remarks:

“Arjuna is esteemed as a profound treatment of a culturally important narrative, but its exalted status in the Sanskrit literary canon is founded above all on Bhāravi's contribution to the development of the court epic form. In the estimation of Sanskrit readers and critics, Arjuna is an exemplary poem because of Bhāravi's sustained excellence in writing verses

that challenge the reader, elegantly fulfilling the Sanskrit poet's mandate to “deepen [the reader's] apprehension by goading to new life the supine energies of word and grammar”.<sup>2</sup>

### III. Śiśupālavadha

Magha's Śiśupālavadha has been next to Kirātārjuniya of Bhāravi, acclaimed as one of the most distinguished and elaborate works within the canon of Sanskrit literature. Māgha uses a well-known plot, transmuted an episode in the Mahābhārata which in the barest terms depicts a dispute between the five Pandava brothers and their ally Kṛṣṇa and the latter's kinsman Śiśupāla.

The Killing of Śiśupālavadha is a poem of twenty cantos consisting of 1638 verses composed in forty-one different meters. It contains a substantial number of the themes and settings prescribed for a mahākāvya by the ancient critics like Bhāmaha and Daṇḍin. Māgha structures his poem around a series of such kaleidoscopically vivid representations of urban, natural, erotic and marital scenes that the central narrative of Śiśupāla's enmity towards Kṛṣṇa and the Pandava brothers is at times totally occluded.

#### Paul Dundas Remarks :

“By reconfiguring the mythology of Kṛṣṇa, first established by the epic and puranic tradition, within the ornate poetic conventions of the elite genre of the Sanskrit mahākāvya, Māgha definitively confirmed the centrality of this divine figure in Vaishnava Hinduism in the concluding centuries of the first millennium C.E. At the same time, The Killing of Śiśupāla is a unique literary work of elaborate and coruscating, imagination, dealing with universally engrossing cultural themes such sex, war and the natural world, that deserves to be encountered purely on its own aesthetic terms.”<sup>3</sup>

### IV. Naiṣadhīyacaritam

A twelfth-century Sanskrit poem entitled the Naiṣadhīyacarita (literally, the Deeds or Adventures of Nala, king of Niṣadha), or simply the Naiṣadhīya, was considered to be the “last” of the great poems of the classical Sanskrit tradition that to the purely native taste, it had been preferable to all other long Sanskrit poems, studied and praised more frequently than even Kālidāsa's works.

“The Naiṣadhīyacarita is the last masterpiece of industry and ingenuity but to class it with the masterpieces of Kālidāsa, Bhāravi, and even Māgha is to betray an ignorance of the

difference between poetry and its counterfeit. Śrīharṣa not only shares but emphasizes to an extreme degree the worst kind of artificialities of his tribe; and no sound-heard, sound-minded reader will ever include him in the small class of great poets... even if a modern critic has the inclination to share the enthusiasm of Śrīharṣa's admirers, the poet's impossible and incessant affectations rise up in witness against such an attitude [The] modern reader often perhaps lacks [the] equipment and aptitude [to appreciate the poem] therefore finds little interest in a work that, for its cult of style, has always been so popular with scholars of a traditional type.”<sup>4</sup>

The Naiśadhiya focuses on the famous romance of Nala and Damayantī, a crucial episode in a larger story about Nala and Damayantī, a crucial episode in a larger story about the famous couple's union, exile, separation, and ultimate reunion. Śrīharṣa chooses only to focus on the couple's falling in love, marriage and honeymoon, the entire story, known to generations of South Asian audiences, is narrated in the Mahābhārata and Somadeva's eleventh-century Kathāsaritsāgara (Ocean of Rivers and Stories) The narrative begins with Nala, king of Naiśadha, who, upon hearing of Damayantī's beauty and virtue, longs to be with her. As he pines for her in the palace garden, a golden haṁsa (the Indian goose) alights nearby. Nala captures the bird but sets it free when it promises to fly to Damayantī's country, Vidarbha in order to unite him with the princess.

The haṁsa reaches Damayantī and describes Nala to her in the most favourable terms. Instantly, she falls in love and feels the weight of being separated from him. Seeing her lovesick, Damayantī's father organizes a svayaṁvara, a royal ceremony where Damayantī would choose her husband among eligible princes.

## V. Campūbhārata

These are the great long poems of classical period which are taught to the university students in Sanskrit, apart from these three, one outstanding champūkāvya, a mixed form both prose and poetry arrests our attention. It is Campū-bhāratam by Ananta Bhatta of 13th century. It is an important work. It contains the story of the Mahābhārata in 10 chapters. The poem begins from the description of Hastināpura up to the coronation of Yudhiṣṭhira, who conducted Āsvamedha sacrifice after the Mahābhārata war is over.

In the modern period of Sanskrit, I find a good number of long poems called mahākāvya. They are the following:

1. Satī-caritam is composed by K.S. Krishna Murthy in 1953. The theme of this epic is the story of Sāvitrī and her husband Satyavāna that has been narrated in the Mahābhārata. Satī-caritam has eleven cantos. It is a very good Mahākāvya.
2. Karṇārjunīyam is composed by Vindhyeshvar Prasad Shastri in 1968. It contains 22 cantos and 1375 verses. This poem mainly deals with the fight between Karṇa and Arjuna.
3. Adbhuta-dutam is composed by Jaggus Vakula Bhusana in 1968. The theme of this epic is taken from the Udyogaparva of the Mahābhārata. It contains 15 cantos. It is a first of its kind.

## VI. Dhananjayavijayam

Dhananjayavijayam is composed by R. Ramasubramaniam Iyer in 1974. This poem is consisting of 18 cantos and 1459 verses. The theme of this poem is taken from the Vanaparva of the Mahābhārata. The poem deals with Arjuna's life and achievements up to the stage of the Bhagavadgītā. It narrates clearly how Arjuna equipped himself not only for the great war but also for the advice of Kṛṣṇa in the Gītā. We find him in his father Indra's court in the heaven shocked by the way of life amongst Gods. He later realizes that their standards and ways of life are different from those of the mortals on earth. We similarly see him as an ascetic praying to God and securing weapons after severe trials. We also see him fulfilling the role of a great householder and husband marrying many princesses who were his admirers. A mahākāvya must have a theme taken from an epic or history. Firstly, in this poem the theme has been taken from the Vanaparva of the Mahābhārata all, Secondly, the hero should be endowed with many good qualities and bold traits. In this poem Arjuna fulfils all those necessary qualities. The poem is interesting for its delineation of sentiment, description of natural beauty and sweet language. Though the theme is old yet it seems to be new in the hand of the master poet.

## VII. Pārthacaritāmṛtam of Brahmadata Vagmi

Pārtha-caritamṛtam is composed by Gulab Chandra Sharma in 1990 consisting of 21 cantos. The poet gives appropriate titles of the cantos in accordance with the incidents, which occurred in the life of Pārtha. It is a good mahākāvya. The hero of this epic is Pārtha.

## VIII. Bhiṣma-caritam

“Among the myriad of players in this epic, two characters stand out prominently: Bhishma, the scion who renounces his right to the kingdom to enable his father marry a woman of his choice, who dominates the entire phase playing the role of an active participant, and later on becoming a learned and well-respected elder statesman and mentor”.<sup>5</sup>

Bhiṣma-caritam is composed by Harinarayan Dikshit in 1991. This epic is divided into 20 cantos and 1118 verses. It covers the story of life of Bhisma who played an important role in the war of the Mahābhārata, consisting of 18 ratnas and 915 verses. The theme of poem is taken from the Mahābhārata.

## IX. Sāmba-sambhavam

Sāmba-sambhavam is composed by Gopīkṛṣṇa Vyāsa. The theme of this epic is taken from the 14th to 18th Adhyāyas of Anuśāsanaparva of the Mahābhārata.

## X. Kirātārjunīyam

Kirātārjunīyam a new mahākāvya of the same title is composed by Jagannath Pathak. It is an unpublished epic. The poem deals with heroic deeds of Arjuna, the most favourite of Sanskrit poets.

The tradition of long poem is still continuing even today. These stereotype poems are composed as per the traditional rules made by the ancient poetics. The poets mainly select the persons like Karṇa and Arjuna and glorify them Sanskrit poets give lot of emphasis on word play and metre and mode of versification.

Mahābhārata which is called a tradition not a text could not prompt to create a work in the line of other Indian writers. Among the available mahākāvyas few are not able for their style, language and techniques deserve appreciation.

This investigation made me aware of the fact that a single fiction like Mṛityunjaya of Shivaji Sawanta, Parva of S.L. Bhairrappas, Yajnaseni of Pratibha roy, Bhima Alone Warrior of Vasudeva Nair, Mahāsamara of Narendra Kohli is not written in Sanskrit. Not even a prose work is available in Sanskrit.

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