

# Voices of Sanskrit Poets



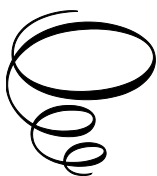
# Voices of Sanskrit Poets:

*A Fresh Look at the Classics*

By

GRK Murty

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Voices of Sanskrit Poets: A Fresh Look at the Classics

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## PREFACE

Reading is said to be a free creative process. It is also said that a disciplined reading of classics enables a reader to possess them as intimate parts of his/her own living experience. Such a possession, emanating from the reader's curious action and interaction with a literary composition, is said to result "in a new being growing in the mind" of every reader. In other words, each reader realises a meaning of his own, a meaning that is different from the other readers of the same text. And that is how classics are believed to have been kept alive by readers from generation to generation.

Such was the experience that I had while reading the texts of Sanskrit poets. These explorations have indeed raised certain questions in my mind: Is Vālmīki's Sīta a feminist archetype? Is infidelity a virtue of Cārudatta of the play, *Mṛichchhakatika*? Is *Mudrārākṣasa* of the 7<sup>th</sup> century an existential play? Is evocation of *rasa* a subjective phenomenon or, as a famous neurologist averred, universal? In an attempt to answer these questions to myself, I have published a few essays in journals during the last eight years. I have also published some essays comparing texts across continents, although scholars of comparative literature are said to have moved away from such comparisons in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, more out of my desire to present an analogy that highlights how some texts, or their protagonists, are exerting more poetical influence in shaping our ethical conduct. This book is an outcome of such publications.

Much has, however, been already written about Sanskrit literature that is imbued with *dharma*, mystic grandeur, and the ultimate win of right over wrong by eminent scholars of the east as well as the west. This may be yet another one, and yet the richness and newness of Sanskrit literature is inexhaustible for every successive writer. Indeed, it is more out of my deeply felt reverence for its spirituality, and having delighted in its beatitude, that I, in spite of my limited knowledge of the Sanskrit language and its literature, could venture to publish these essays in the form of a book simply to share its charms and pleasures as experienced by me. Of course, one disadvantage of publishing essays written over a period as a book, is that some kind of repetition of poetic-concepts and their elaborations is bound to creep in, despite conscious editing, more as a contextual requirement. I can only request readers' indulgence for such incursions here and there.

Lastly, the only merit that I would like to claim for these essays is that they do focus on the primary impact of the texts they discuss, so that readers, who disagree with my arguments or judgements, could at least pick up the original texts and read them, to check the correctness of my arguments, and formulate their own synthesis. If that happens, I shall feel quite happy.

My indebtedness to the eminent Sanskrit scholars of the past is indeed great. I thank my colleagues, past and present, who encouraged me by evincing keen interest in this project. It would be remiss of me if I do not recall my association with late Prof. SS Prabhakar Rao, former Head, Dept. of English, JNTU, and the late Sri NJ Yaraswy, founder member of the ICFAI, and the encouragement they gave me in pursuing these interests. Lastly, I thank Cambridge Scholars Publishing for publishing this book so beautifully.

—GRK Murty



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The rest of the chapters are based on the earlier versions published in *The IUP Journal of English Studies*, and I am grateful to the Editor for permitting me to include them in this book.

The verses quoted from the *Vālmīki Rāmāyana* in Chapters One, Two, Three, Nine and Thirteen are sourced from *Śrīmad Vālmīki Rāmāyaṇa* Parts I and II, 2001, Gita Press, Gorakhpur, India; <https://www.valmiki.iitk.ac.in>; <https://www.valmikiramayan.net>

The quotes in Chapter Five are sourced from: *Svapnavāsavadattam of Bhasa* by M A Karandikar and Shailaja Karandikar. 1956. Poona: Venus Prakashan; *Two Plays of Bhasa* by A S P Ayyar. 1959. Madras: V Ramaswamy Sastrulu and Sons; and *Alcestis* by Euripides. 1930. Trans. Richard Aldington, Chatto and Windus.

The quotes in Chapter Six are taken from: *Kālidāsa, Translations of Śākuntala and Other Works* by Arthur W Ryder. 1928. London and Toronto: J M Dent & Sons Ltd.; and *The Complete Works of Shakespeare* edited by David Bevington. 2004. USA: Pearson Longman.

The quotes in Chapter Seven are sourced from: *The Little Clay Cart* by Arthur W Ryder, Trans. 1905. Cambridge: Harvard University; and *The Mṛichchhakatika of Sūdraka* by Vasant Ramachandra Nerurkar. 1937. Bombay: The Bombay Book Depot.

The quotes in Chapter Eight are sourced from: *Kundamāla of Dinnaga* by Jagadishlal Shastri. 1983. Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass.

Some of the quotes in Chapter Nine are sourced from: *Ritusamhara* by R S Pandit. 1944. Bombay: The National Information & Publications Ltd.; *Kālidāsa's Meghadūta* by Kashinath Babu Pathak. 1916. Poona: The Oriental Book-Supplying Agency; *Mṛichchhakatika* edited by M R Kale. 1962. New Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass; *The Little Clay Cart* by Arthur W Ryder. 1905. Harvard Oriental Series; and *Āmuktamalyada* of Vavilla Ramaswamisastrulu and Sons.

The quotes in Chapter Ten are sourced from *Nāgānanda*, in *Six Sanskrit Plays* edited by H W Wells. 1964. Asia Publishing House; and *Nāgānandam, Telugu Vyakhya* by Betavolu Ramabrahmam. 2001. Hyderabad: Potti Sri Ramulu Telugu Viswavidyalayam.

The quotes in Chapter Eleven are sourced from *Mudrārākṣasa: With Sanskrit Text, English Translation and Notes*, by K H Dhruva. 1923. Poona: The Oriental Book Supplying Agency; and *Two Plays of Ancient India: The Little Clay Cart, The Minister's Seal*, tr. Daniel H H Ingalls. 1968. New York: Columbia University Press.

The quotes in Chapter Twelve are sourced from *Uttararāmacarita Natakamu* (in Telugu) by Vadhula Veera Raghavacharya. 1969. Madras: Vavilla Ramaswamysastrulu & Sons; *Uttararāmacarita of Bhavabhuti* by R D Karmarkar. Delhi: Chaukhamb Sanskrit Pratisthan; and *Uttararāmacarita of Bhavabhuti, with the commentary of Ghanasyama, Notes and Translation* by P V Kane and C N Joshi. 1962. Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass.

The quotes in Chapter Thirteen are sourced from: *An Anthology of Sanskrit Court Poetry* by Daniel H H Ingalls, tr. 1965. Cambridge: Massachusetts: Harvard University Press; “A Study of Indian Spring Festivals from Ancient and Medieval Sanskrit Texts” by Anderson Leona. 1985. Ph.D. Dissertation. Ontario: McMaster University; *Gita Govinda of Jayadeva* by Lee Siegel, tr. 2009. New York: New York University Press; Kale, M R, tr. 2005. *The Raghuvamsa of Kālidāsa*. New Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass Publishers; and *Kālidāsa's Kumarasambhava* by M R Kale, tr. 1917. Bombay: The Standard Publishing Co.

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## INTRODUCTION

*Vast is the ocean of sacred words  
Which enlightens the universe  
With divine vision<sup>1</sup>  
—Rg 1.3.12*

Sanskrit is revered by Indians as ‘*Diva Bhasha*’ — the language of gods. It is the liturgical language of Hinduism and Buddhism. The word *Sam̐skṛta* means refined and well-ordered, for it was a language well regulated by the rules of grammar and was used in that refined form by the learned elite from very early times. As William Jones observed, it has a perfect structure and is more exquisitely refined than Greek and Latin, yet bears a stronger affinity to both of them. The knowledge of Sanskrit in the western world has led to the emergence of new schools and disciplines for study, such as comparative mythology, comparative religion, and comparative linguistics.<sup>2</sup>

It is in Sanskrit that the seers and poets of India have expressed their religious and secular knowledge, thoughts, and wisdom, right from prehistoric times to about 1100 AD. Sanskrit literature has mainly achieved greatness in religion and philosophy which is of unique originality. Similar kinds of accomplishment can also be noticed in the disciplines of phonetics, grammar, mathematics, astronomy, medicine, and law. It is the language of Hindu, Buddhist and Jain scriptures. The sheer bulk of the literature, which “exceeds in quantity that of Greece and Rome put together”<sup>3</sup>, the multitude of ideas explored, and the length of time over which it was written, makes the neat categorising and classifying of Sanskrit literature difficult. Above this, owing to the tendency of earlier authors not to claim authorship, the dating of these writings has been made even more difficult.

The history of Sanskrit literature can be divided into two parts: the Vedic period, from 3000 BC to 600 BC and the Classic period, from 600 BC to 1100 AD. After the composition of *Vedas*, Sanskrit changed considerably: old inflections disappeared and new vocabulary and a simplified grammar emerged. The difference between the Vedic Sanskrit and Classic Sanskrit can be said to be akin to that between Homeric and Classical Greek. A striking feature of Vedic Sanskrit is its tonic accent. It is considered as an apt language for vigorous and noble expression.

## The Vedic Period

The *Vedas* are the earliest literary production in Sanskrit. They are mostly religious in their content and form, and are four in number: *R̥g Veda*, *Sāma Veda*, *Yajur Veda*, and *Atharva Veda*. They contain *mantras*, hymns of incantation and supplication addressed to natural and cosmic phenomena, such as *Agni* (fire), *Surya* and *Savitri* (the sun), *Ushas* (dawn), *Rudras* (the storms) and *Indra* (rain), and other abstract qualitatives such as *Mitra* (friendship), *Varuna* (moral authority), *Indra* (kingship), and *Vāch* (speech). The visions of the beauty of life and nature in the *Vedas* are extremely rich in poetic value. The glory of dawn and sunrise, and the silence and sweetness of nature, have received a rich and pure expression.<sup>4</sup>

The word '*Veda*' signifies knowledge. *Veda* is interpreted in many ways. According to Sāyaṇa, the great Vedic commentator, "*Veda* is that by which the means of obtaining the transcendental goal of man is known". He offered another definition: "*Istaprāpti-anistaparihārayor alaukika upāyah vedah* (The *Veda* is that which makes known the transcendental means of obtaining the desirable and avoiding the undesirable)". On the other hand, the *Mīmāṃsā* and *Vedānta* schools posit that the *Veda* is an eternal and infallible source of knowledge regarding *Dharma*.<sup>5</sup> There are however, three important interpretations of *Veda*<sup>6</sup> which merit our attention: (i) the ritualists consider *Veda* as mainly a source book which informs us how to perform rituals for obtaining this-worldly and other-worldly good, (ii) polytheistic interpretation accepts Vedic gods as realities, and rituals as acts of propitiation and worship, and (iii) monotheistic interpretation states that the sum and substance of the *Veda* is the glorification of the one God, just as *R̥g Veda* says, "*Ekam sat; viprā bahudhā vadanti* (Truth is one; sages call it by various names)". Irrespective of these interpretations, *Vedas* have a profound influence upon Indians: "The whole life of a Hindu, from conception up to the last funeral rites, has to be sanctified by the recitation of *Vedic mantras*".<sup>7</sup>

There are three clear stages of development in Vedic literature: the first stage of development is associated with *Samhita*; the second stage of development is related to *Brāhmmanas*, and the third stage is *Upanishads*. *Samhita*, which is formed from the root words, *sam* meaning 'correct' and 'proper', and *hita* meaning 'arranged', denotes the 'arrangement of *Vedic* hymns in unity'. Thus, the four *Vedas* with just *mantras* put together constitute *Samhita* literature. In short, *Samhita* is the first and the main part of the *Veda* that contains *mantras* — prayers, litanies and hymns to God. The *Samhita* (four *Vedas*) is divided into ten *Mandalas*. Each *Mandala* is subdivided into *Anuvākas*, which are again divided into *Sūktas* containing a

number of *Riks*. The composition of these hymns may have spread across many centuries. Yet, right from the earliest poems of *Samhita*, they maintain a strict metrical scheme and a well-established literary convention.

Of the *Samhita* literature consisting of four *Vedas*, *R̥g Veda* is the oldest and most important of them. It consists only of verses — *rik* (laudatory stanza) — and hence it is also known as the ‘*Veda* of verses’. It has, in all, 10,552 *rik/mantras*, or hymns, that mainly praise different Gods. In these hymns, natural forces and phenomena are personified and deified. *R̥g Veda* frequently mentions prayer and sacrifice as the means to acquire happiness. It also contains marriage, philosophical, and funeral, hymns. The authorship of the various *Riks* was attributed to the great seers, such as Vasistha, Gautama, Gritasamada, Vāmadeva, Vishvamitra, Atri, etc. These *Riks*, though they are said to be addressed to one supreme being, are praising his many powers under different names, such as: “Even He is Agni, He is Āditya, He is Vāyu, He is Chandramās, He is Śukra, He is Brahmā, He is Āpa, He is Prajāpati”.<sup>1</sup> Hymns of this nature reveal that, “by the end of the *R̥g vedic* period the polytheism of the *Rishis* had received a monotheistic tinge”.<sup>8</sup>

The *Sāma Veda* means ‘*Veda* of chants’. It is of lesser significance, for it has merely rearranged the stanzas taken from the *R̥g Veda*, with the addition of 75 new stanzas, solely with reference to their place in the *Soma* sacrifice. These verses are supposed to be sung in a set fashion: the prolongation, repetition, and interpolation, of syllables were prescribed for singing. It is believed that these hymns are fruitful only when they are chanted in rhythm, with proper high and low notes called ‘*swara*’. It is the vibrations created that give value to the hymns. These are chanted during the high rituals.

*Yajur Veda* consists not only of stanzas borrowed from *R̥g Veda*, but also its own explanations of the *R̥g vedic* hymns in prose. Here too, the contents are arranged in the order in which they are employed in various sacrifices. It is a compilation of the formulas prescribed by priests who, as the followers of *Yajur Veda*, are engaged in performing rituals. It contains some of the best hymns which transcend the stage of petty needs and longings, for the highest purpose, such as: “*Mitrasya mā cakṣusā sarvāni bhūtāni samīkṣantām, Mitrasya cakṣusā sarvāni bhūtāni samīkṣe, Mitrasya cakṣusā samīkṣā mahe* (May all beings look upon me with the eye of a friend, may I look on all beings with the eye of a friend, may we look on

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<sup>1</sup> *Yajur veda* 22-1.

one another with the eye of a friend”)<sup>ii</sup> (xxvi-18). What a catholicity of a prayer!

In the beginning, it was only these three *Vedas* — *trayī vidya* (the threefold knowledge) — that were recognised as canonical scriptures. After a lapse of considerable time, *Atharva Veda* was compiled as the fourth *Veda*. Its contents are almost analogous to the *R̥g Veda*, consisting of mostly metrical hymns. It “implies a philosophy of aggression: through witchcraft and magic, one should ruthlessly weed out one’s rivals and enemies, get things one wants, and also the persons one falls in love with. The demons similarly have to be kept at a distance by these means. To please and coerce the deities and departed ancestors, sacrifices are enjoined. Diseases have to be cured by medicines. Social life, success in business and agriculture, dominance in society, and intelligence — these are the values which the *Atharva Veda* holds up”.<sup>9</sup>

It is through oral communication that these *Samhita* texts are transmitted from generation to generation with the right phonetic accents and accuracy. Once these sacred hymns became part and parcel of the worship of deities and sacrifice to propitiate them, there, perhaps, has arisen a need to elaborate their significance, to ensure their observance rightly by later generations. Thus emerged *Brāhmmanas* and *Aranyakas*. *Brāhmmanas* are prosaic in nature, dealing “with the rules and regulations laid down for the performance of the rites and sacrifices”,<sup>10</sup> and are written in prose. They “explain the mutual relation of the sacred text and the ceremonial and as well as their symbolical meaning with reference to each other. They are considered to be the oldest prose writing in the Indi-European family”.<sup>11</sup> The subject matter of the individual *Brāhmmanas* is defined by the *Vedas* to which they are attached. Thus, *R̥g Veda* has two well-known *Brāhmmanas*: *Kaushitaki* and *Aitreya*. *Tandya Brāhmmana* belongs to *Sāma Veda*. *Taittiriya* and *Shatpath* belong to *Yajur Veda*. *Gōpatha* is attached to *Atharva Veda*.

The second part of *Vedas* is *Aranyaka*. Each *Veda* has got its own *Aranyakas*. They were authored by hermits who had withdrawn into the quiet of the forest to meditate. They dealt with the proper performance of the sacrifices and rituals, besides giving them a symbolic and spiritual interpretation. They are theosophical in character and are meant for the use of pious men who have returned to the forest and no longer perform sacrifices. They speculate about the world-soul under the names of *Prāna* and *Purusha*. Interestingly, *Aranyakas* mark the “transition from ritualistic to philosophic thought”.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>ii</sup> English translation by K D Sangoram.

*Vedas* thus, portray God as the creator and source of goodness and truth. One's life should be dedicated wholly to God. This does not, however, rule out the living of a full life here and now, for reality is good and is to be enjoyed. Indeed, the Vedic rishi would not allow either a licentious freedom to the senses, or an ascetic suppression of them. He prayed for both material welfare and spiritual good — spiritual good not only of himself, but of everybody, as can be realised from these prayers: "O God, bestow on us the best treasures, the efficient mind, and spiritual lustre, the increase of wealth, the health of bodies, the sweetness of speech and fairness of days" (*Rg Veda* II.21.6). Along with such petitionary prayers, there are also universal prayers such as: "May all men in this world live in happiness absolutely free from any kind of disease and with minds full of righteousness and devotion" (*Yajur Veda* XVI.4). Such was the Vedic seers' concern for auspiciousness that they wanted to clean this world from evil; physical in the shape of pain, psychological in the form of agony, and moral in the form of sin. Another of the greatest gifts of *Vedic* thought to Indians is the attitude of tolerance, and this is perhaps rooted in the kind of doubt reflected in the hymn of Creation:

None knoweth whence creation has arisen;  
And whether he has or has not produced it:  
He who surveys it in the highest heaven,  
He only knows, or haply he may know not.

— *Rg Veda*, X 129

It is this hesitancy that minimised religious dogmatism in India. Another profound thought that *Vedas* gift is the belief in the oneness of reality. All is one: *Brahman* and *Ātman* are one. Man is one with God. Man is divine. All is divine.

*Upanishads* are the concluding portions of *Vedic* literature and are therefore called *Vedānta* — the end of *Vedas*. They occupy a unique place in Indian philosophy. It may be said that while *Vedas* demonstrate a spirit of wonderment in the face of elemental realities, the *Upanishads*, turning inward, analyse the realities of the self. The principal *Upanishads* are said to be 13 in number, and they are: *Isā*, *Kena*, *Katha*, *Prasna*, *Mundaka*, *Māndūkya*, *Taittirya*, *Aitareya*, *Chāndogya*, *Bṛihadāraṇyaka*, *Svetāsvatara*, *Kausītaki* and *Maitreyi Upanishads*. These *Upanishads*, besides seeking to know reality itself, have attempted to attain the ultimate goal of life, which they name as: *Śreyas* (good), *Śānti* (peace), *Ānanda* (bliss), *Amṛita* (immortality), etc. The objective of their philosophical inquiry can be

termed as two-fold: ontological and ethical, together leading to a sound philosophy of life.

As the *Upanishads* emerged somewhere in 600 BC, the faith in cosmic mystery of sacrifice had started waning, giving way to the rise of asceticism and the quest for ultimate reality. The ascetics raised philosophical questions such as, “Through understanding of what, pray, does all this world become understood?” (*Mundakōpanishad*), “By whom impelled soars forth the mind? By whom enjoined goes forth the earliest breathing? By whom impelled this speech people utter? [...]” (*Kenōpanishad*), etc., and also attempted to discuss them in *Upanishads*. With this philosophical enquiry, the Gods of the *R̥g Veda* and the ghosts of the *Atharva Veda* melted and coalesced into one supreme reality, known as *Brahman*.

The subject matter of the *Upanishads* is *Brahman*, the ultimate reality, and *Ātman*, the individual self. The seers of the *Upanishads* strictly confined themselves to the rules of logic, while pointing to the realm beyond the mind. The central theme underlying all the *Upanishads* is that the *Brahman* and the *Ātman* are identical. They see no qualitative difference between the two. That is what the *Chhāndogya Upanishad* states: “This whole world consists of it: that is the Real, that is the Soul, that art thou, O Svetaketu”. The teachings of all the *Upanishads* are summed up thus: “*Tat tvam asi* (That art thou)”. The *Bṛihadāraṇyaka* says: “Whoever knows this, ‘I am *Brahman*’ (*aham brahma asmi*), becomes the All”. Even the Gods are not able to prevent him from becoming it. For he becomes their Self — *Ātman*. *Kathōpanishad* says that whoever is able to recognise the identity of the individual soul with *Brahman*, raises beyond the reach of death:

When every passion vanishes  
That nestles in the human heart,  
Then man gains immortality,  
Then *Brahman* is obtained by him.

*Kathōpanishad*, vi. 14

*Upanishadic* thought is of distinctive nature, which is neither purely metaphysical, nor purely ethical. Also, it cannot be said to be merely a combination of these two. It represents reality in life. The reality, as per the *Upanishadic* seers, is *sat-cit-ānanda* — truth, the enduring and unchanging, infinite consciousness, and ever-new bliss. Their search was not for mere satisfaction of intellectual curiosity by knowledge in the epistemological sense, but attainment or realisation of that imperishable happiness. It was more a journey from knowledge to realisation, from mere knowing to being. The ultimate that the *Upanishads* seek through their speculative thought is: *Śānti* (peace, tranquillity or contentment) as is denoted by the recitation of



an invocation at the beginning and ending of every *Upanishad* for peace: “*Om! Śānti! Śānti!! Śānti!!!*”

The four *Vedas* in their totality, i.e., the *Samhitas*, the *Brāhmanas*, the *Aranyakas*, and the *Upanishads*, make up the *Śruti* — the primary scripture and authority, whose truths are believed to have been directly revealed to, or intuited by, the early seers. They are accepted as sacred and infallible. They are believed to be God-made. *Smṛiti* literature, on the other hand, is a derivative from *Śruti*. They were written to explain *Śruti* so as to make them easily understandable for the masses. *Smṛiti* literature, being the product of human intellect, became a recognised law that whenever a difference arises between *Śruti* and the *Smṛiti*, the *Śruti* has to be upheld as the supreme authority, and the *Smṛiti* has to be interpreted in consonance with it. Scholars such as DS Sarma divided *Smṛiti* literature into five groups: Law codes, Epics, *Purānas*, *Āgamas* and *Darsanas*.<sup>13</sup>

## The *Sūtra* Period

As we reached the last stage of Vedic literature period (560 BC to 200 BC), there came into existence a distinct form of literature known as *Sūtras*. It treated a large number of subjects relating to *Vedas*. These are compiled from the contents of *Brāhmanas* to meet the practical needs of the priestly community. Though they are related to the ritual aspect of *Brāhmanas*, they form a part of *Smṛiti* literature. The whole body of *Sūtra* literature that deals with the subject of *Vedas* is considered as *Vedāngas* — Vedic supplements — and is divided into six *Vedāngas*: *Siksha*, or phonetics; *vyakarana*, or grammar; *chhandas*, or metre; *nirukta* or etymology; *kalpa*, or religious practice; and *jyotisha*, or astronomy. The first four were meant as aids to the correct reciting and understanding of the sacred texts, while the last two deal with religious rites or duties, and their proper seasons.

These *Vedāngas* were written in the form of *Sūtras*, precepts. The word *Sūtra* literally means the thread that stitches various thoughts into a logical and self-consistent whole. They convey the essence of arguments on an issue. In these *Sūtras*, maximum thought is compressed in as few words as possible. They are known for their extraordinary brevity. And that is what makes them easy to remember.

It is to preserve the purity of the *Vedas* that the seers developed the science of phonetics, etymology, and grammar. Yāska’s *Nirukta*, the oldest Indian text that explained, and interpreted, the obsolete Vedic words, was developed in the 5<sup>th</sup> century BC. Yāska’s *Nirukta*, which is developed based on the earlier *Nighantus* (a collection of rare Vedic words), is also considered as the earliest specimen of Sanskrit prose in the classical style.

Pāṇini's grammar text, the *Astādhyayi* (Eight Chapters) was said to have been composed towards the end of the 4<sup>th</sup> century BC.<sup>14</sup> It contained as many as 4,000 *Sūtras* — rules in their shortest form. Its terseness makes it very difficult to follow unless it is studied systematically. Acquiring an infallible authority and superseding all its predecessors, Pāṇini grammar not only dominated the subsequent literature but also stabilised the Sanskrit language. It is with the introduction of Pāṇini grammar that Sanskrit language began to be called *Samskṛta*, the perfected language. But reaching its classical form with Pāṇini grammar, the Sanskrit language developed little thereafter, except in vocabulary.

The whole body of *Sūtras* concerned with religion and belonging to different *Vedas* is called *Kalpa Sūtras*, which is classified under five heads: *Srauta Sūtras* deal with the worship of the three sacred fires, Soma sacrifices, etc.; *Grihya Sūtras* are rules for the numerous ceremonies applicable to the domestic life of a man and his family, right from birth to death; *Dharma Sūtras* deal with the customs of everyday life and the duties of the four castes and the different stages of life; and *Shulva Sūtras* are manuals guiding the construction of *Vedi*, the altars and so forth, based on geometrical concepts.

The *Dharma Śāstras* (law codes) are the first in the Smṛiti literature. The best known of them is the *Mānava Dharma Śāstra* or *Manusmṛiti* (The Laws of Manu). It is said to have been composed in its final form in the 2<sup>nd</sup> or 3<sup>rd</sup> century AD.<sup>15</sup> In sum, it is “an encompassing representation of life in the world — how it is, and how it should be, lived.” These laws are meant to ensure a society, which would be just and enduring. And the means prescribed for such a society are: the cultivation of virtues such as self-control, non-injury, generosity, and non-attachment. This is considered as “India's greatest achievement in the field of jurisprudence”.<sup>16</sup>

During the *Sūtra* period, another noteworthy development took place. In order to preserve the text of the *Vedas* from loss or change, *Anukramanīs* — indices were developed. They contained the first word of each hymn, its author, the deity celebrated in it, the number of verses it contains, and the metre in which it is composed. There are also *Parisishtas* which are supplements to *Sūtras*, and the *Prayōgas* and *Paddhatis* that define the function of priests, etc. All these form part of the Vedic literature, but are categorised as *Smṛiti* literature.

Apart from this, the post-Vedic *Śāstras*, such as the *Nyaya Sūtras* of Gautama, the *Vaisesika Sūtras* of Kanād, the *Mīmāṃsā Sūtras* of Jaimini, the *Sārīrkā Sūtras* of Bādarāyana, the *Sankhya Sūtras* of Kapila, and the *Yoga Sūtras* of Patanjali, which are commonly termed as *Shad-darśanas*, all belong to this period. *Darśana* means showing the path (of life). These

thoughts of the seers are what constitute a system of Indian philosophy. They essentially deal with the nature of *Brahman*, the nature of the soul, the creation of the world, and *Mokṣa*, or liberation from the materialistic world and the path that leads to it.

Traditionally, Indian philosophy is divided into two broad categories: Orthodox (*āstika*, theist) and Heterodox (*nāstika*, atheist). The Orthodox school of philosophy accepts the authority of the *Vedas*, while the Heterodox school rejects them. The *Shaddarśanas* of Indian philosophy belong to the Orthodox, while *Chārvāka*, Buddhism, and Jainism, belong to the Heterodox system. Of the later three, *Cārvākism* is more empirical and positivistic in its approach, and hence denies the existence of supernatural, trans-mundane and abstract entities. By treating death as the final end of life, it, in a way, encourages an over-egoistic and selfish attitude in individuals. Indeed, it exhibits an ignoble, sensualistic materialism. So, no wonder, if it is criticised by all other systems of Indian philosophy.

Bharatamuni's *Nāṭyaśāstra*, the first Sanskrit work on dramaturgy, came into existence during the *Sūtra* period. It is a classic manual on the theory and practice of Indian aesthetics — theatre, music, dance, poetics, gestures, and many other allied arts. It primarily aims to offer necessary directions to actors so as to enable them to enact their chosen parts, and to the dramatists to enable them to write flawless plays. It also presents the doctrine of *Rasa* and the means of its presentation. Right from the construction of the stage and the method of its management, to types of plays, method of dramatization, and types of hero, heroine and adversary, are discussed at length in it. Explaining and expounding *Nāṭyaśāstra*, many commentaries have emerged in the succeeding centuries.

## The Classical Period (Epics)

During the period circa 500 to 50 BC, there emerged a literature that was essentially different from that of the earlier Vedic age. It was fundamentally secular in character, as against the religious nature of the Vedic literature. The two great epics, *Mahābhārata* and *Rāmāyana* are of this category.

The *Rāmāyana* is said to be the first epic, and the tradition identifies sage Vālmīki, who lived between 400 and 200 BCE, as its author. The central theme of the *Rāmāyana* is “illustrating the ideals, concepts and values of the Vedic culture, which is based on *Rta* (cosmic order), *Satya* (truth), *Dharma* (justice) and *Tapas* (penance)”<sup>17</sup> through the graceful march of Rāma, the main character of the epic, along with his consort, Sīta, from Ayodhya to Lanka and back. The poet, identifying Rāma and Sīta as the characters of his mission, simply uses their thoughts, actions, and

expressions as the everlasting message for humanity. Vālmīki, the poet of vision, using his solemn touch, makes even inanimate objects express themselves better than articulate beings. For instance, at the very beginning of the epic, the poet, standing on the bank of the river Tamasa and watching the whispering waves, wonders if the crystal clear water is suggesting that the human mind too, should follow the fascinating movement of river-water, thus giving a secular expression to the incomprehensible voice of the river: “*Akardmāmidam tēṛth Bharadwaja nisamai, ramanēyam prasannābu sanmanushya manōyathā* (Look, my dear Bharadwaja! Just listen to the pleasant and placid water flowing with graceful gait like pure conscience of a gentle person)”. In so saying to his disciple, the poet might be wishing for humanity to cultivate such a pure conscience which radiates dignity, decency, and decorum in its behaviour. In fact, a dispassionate reading of the *Rāmāyana* gives us a feeling that we are only hearing the voice of its author, Vālmīki, interpreting *Dharma* as per the sanction of tradition, and the, then, social system, through his characters. No wonder scholars have been describing the *Rāmāyana* as a poetic version of the Vedic vision — *Vedah prachetasadasit sakshat Rāmāyanātmana*.

The *Mahābhārata* was written by Vyāsa between 400 and 100 BC. It has been edited and modified by a good number of writers later. Containing a little over 90,000 stanzas, which are mostly of thirty-two syllables, it narrates the great dynastic war in the ancient kingdom of the Kurus. It essentially aims at asserting that truth and righteousness eventually prevail. The most famous part of the *Mahābhārata* is the *Bhagavad Gīta*. At the outset of the *Mahābhārata*’s central battle at Kurukṣetra, Krishna, in the disguise of a charioteer, is in a conversation with Arjuna, who is at a loss to understand how killing so many people, particularly his revered teachers and relatives can be a good thing. He explains the doctrine of the immortality of the soul thus: “Just as a man casts off his worn-out clothes and puts on new ones, so the embodied soul casts off its worn-out bodies and takes other new ones” (2.22). Patiently clarifying all his doubts, makes Arjuna battle-ready. It does not merely propose the doctrine of immortality but also offers spiritual guidance to all kinds of devotees, viz., *karma*, *bhakti*, *dhyāna* and *jñāna*, in a simple, clear and elegant way, and hence it became so popular.

The *Mahābhārata* is perhaps “the longest single poem in the world’s literature”<sup>18</sup> imparting the truths and virtues enjoined in the *Smṛiti* to the masses through stories involving real or legendary heroes. It is the plurality of its characteristics, as literature in the form of poetic drama, as a chronicle of history overlaid with legend and myth, and as an encyclopaedia of philosophy, secular knowledge and thought, which made the *Mahābhārata*

appeal greatly to listeners.<sup>19</sup> For instance, the *Mahābhārata*, raising a problematic issue in connection with Vedic authority, solves it by enunciating a simple principle. The issue is posed thus: “If *dharma*s are not the same from age to age, and the *pramāna* standard/proof for all of them, the one *Veda*, is also changing, can it still be the source of eternal truth? How can mutually-contradictory traditions, some of which also contain those opposed to the *Veda*, together with the *Veda*, or each of them, be *pramāna*? The *Mahābhārata* answers this through a declaration of the principal character of a story it narrates: ‘I know the *dharma* eternal with its secret, ancient, good and friendly for all beings. *Adrohenaiṣa bhūtānam alpadrohena vā punah, yā vṛttih sa paro dharmah*[...] (To live without malice, or at least with minimum malice towards beings is the supreme *dharma*)’.<sup>20</sup> This epic has therefore been considered by the learned as the fifth *Veda*.

It is evident that the *Rāmāyana* and the *Mahābhārata* were essentially written to instil the truths and virtues enjoined in the *Smṛiti* in the minds of people, through stories about real or legendary heroes. The characters of these epics are embodied with ideals that people have accepted and striven to follow. Even today, common folks listen eagerly to these recitations by the learned in the temple precincts, particularly, their elaborations about the moral lessons and the spiritual truths of an immemorial tradition. These two are indeed acknowledged as the gospel of *Dharma* for the Hindu world, as its essence runs like a thread through these two epics thus: “*Dharmena nidhanam śreyah na jayah pāpakarmanā* (it is better to die by *Dharma* than to win by sin). All latter day Sanskrit literature — *Kāvyaś*, poetry and plays — heavily relied on these two mighty epics for their motifs, and plots.

Then came the *Purāṇas* (ancient lore), which are equally important as “instruments of popular education”.<sup>21</sup> There are 18 main *Purāṇas*, equally divided between the trinity: Vishnu, Brahma, and Siva. They were written by Vyāsa, the author of the *Mahābhārata*. The concept of *Avatāra* was fully developed in the *Purāṇas*. For example, Vishnu, who symbolises the preserving principle in the universe, has ten incarnations. The ethical and abstract and spiritual truths embedded in the *Vedas* and *Upanishads* are made more meaningful by the *Purāṇas*, by personalising them as accounts of legendary or real kings. They emphasise love and devotion to God. The very essence of these 18 *Purāṇas* is well captured in the *Vyāsasya vachana dwayam* thus: “*parōpakārah punyāya, pāpāya parapēdanam* (in the words of Vyāsa, helping and doing service to others is *punyam* and hurting others is *pāpam*, sin”).

## ***Maha Kāvya*s (Court Epics – 200 BC-1100 AD)**

*Kāvya*, a Sanskrit term, denoting a form of art that is adorned with figurative speech, is said to have its origin well before the Christian era. *Kāvya*s are known as court poetry, for most of them were composed in urban centres by poets patronised by princes in a ‘hyper-refined’ style of language that is set to metre with precious erudition, as though meant only for the literati. As against *Vedic* literature which is exclusively of religious nature, the subject of a *Kāvya* is secular. It has subjects such as love, nature, panegyric, moralising and storytelling as its raw material.<sup>22</sup> Deriving stories from the epics or *Purānas*, the *Kāvya*s retold them with new interpretations, new characterisations of the heroes and heroines, and often adding invented episodes. *Ācārya* Mammaṭa defines *Kāvya* as a combination of sound and sense, free from blemishes, endowed with qualities, and sometimes devoid also of poetic figures or embellishments. They have aesthetic value. According to Abhinavagupta, *Rasa* is the essence of the *Kāvya*, and all other things are its mere aids.

*Kāvya*s are of two types: *drśya kāvya* — that which is capable of being exhibited on a stage, and appeals through the eye and ear; and *śravya kāvya* — that which appeals through the ear only. *Śravya kāvya* could be a *Mahākāvya* — a long poem, or of a short lyric form. It also includes a narrative form that is often adorned by *kāvya*-type literary fancies. A *Mahākāvya* usually comprises a variable number of cantos of usually short length, each being written in a different metre, that is in sync with the subject matter, and is known to include beautiful descriptions about nature, seasons, festivals, war, and triumph.<sup>23</sup> Sanskrit poets have not hesitated in describing the most delicate acts of the sex-life as though in competition with each other. Nevertheless, an element of moralising running as an undercurrent is common to the *Kāvya*s of most of the poets.

The poetry in the *Kāvya*s always honoured the grammatical rules laid down by Panini, and obeyed the laws laid down in various treatises regarding various forms of alliteration and figures of speech. It usually aimed at arousing emotion, an emotion that causes an aesthetic sensation from a feeling that has been lifted to such a plane from where grief is no longer felt as grief, or love is no longer perceived as love. The prime aim of *Kāvya*’s poetry is the evocation of *Rasa*, a state of bliss in the reader, an “impersonalised and ineffable aesthetic enjoyment from which every trace of its component material is obliterated”.<sup>24</sup> Thus, with its allusive words and its penumbra, with its luxurious images, cadence of rhyme, jingling alliteration of word-sounds, the poetry of the *Kāvya*s creates a wonderland of magic and joy that transports a reader to a new world of beauty.<sup>25</sup>

Another important element of Sanskrit poetry is the theory of *Dhvani* (suggestion), or ‘incantation of words and phrases’. Although the concept of *dhvani* was in existence primarily as a grammarian notion, discussed by Patanjali, and later by Bhartruhari, it is Ānandavardhana who first defined *dhvani* as an independent poetic process which encompasses all other poetic tropes. In his *Dhvanyāloka*, he introduced it as “linguistic resonance” that defines not only the aesthetic framework of a *kāvya* but also the mechanism by which the audience experiences the dominant *rasa* aesthetic sentiment. He thus proposed the concept of *dhvani* as a ‘*rasa-centric*’ poetic paradigm. Although initially there was disagreement, particularly from the *Alankāra* school of poetics, later with Abhinavagupta’s discussions in his *Locana*, *Dhvani* was accepted as the *ātma* soul of a *Kāvya*.

*Dhvani* is not an idiom or metaphor, nor is it an implicature, it is rather, a non-paraphrasable ‘suggestion’ of a word, phrase, sentence, topic, or linguistically constructed situation. To say non-paraphrasable does not mean that one cannot say anything about it; on the contrary, one can say many things about it. Elaborating on this, he draws attention to the three main types of meaning of words identified by Indian linguists and semioticians: one, *abhidā* (denotational meaning); two, *lakṣana* (connotational meaning); and three, *vyānjana* (suggested meaning). He explains that each of these types of meaning can also be an example of *dhvani*. For instance, take the statement, “The house is on the Ganges”. Its literary meaning does not make any sense here, for a house cannot be on the river. So, it needs to be discarded. Then emerges the *lakṣana* meaning: the house is on the bank of the Ganges. The suggested meanings from this statement — beginning with the last word, ‘Ganges’, as it should be — can have a diverse range of meanings, depending on the poetic frame imbued with the overarching aesthetic emotion. One suggested meaning could be: the village, being on the banks of Ganges, is a holy place, which again depends on the cultural knowledge of the reader.

According to Ānandavardhana, ‘suggestion’ undergirds all linguistic expression. He says that *dhvani* is of three types: *vastu dhvani* (suggestion of plot or facts); *alankāra dhvani* (literary and figurative suggestion); and *rasa dhvani* (suggestion of sentiment). Of the three, *rasa dhvani* is considered by Ānandavardhana as the most important form of *dhvani*, for it engenders *rasa* in the audience, of course, not as the intellectual implication of some sentiment, but the ‘suggestion’ of a *rasa* as an affective experience. These *rasas* are evoked in a reader by words, sentences, topics, etc., presented in a literary work, but not through literal meaning, or even through their secondary meanings as such, but “through the clouds of non-denumerable,

non-substitutable, non-propositional suggestions which surround these texts”.

According to Abhinavagupta, *rasadhvani* operates through the semantic *dhvani*: the literary work activates *vāsanās* (traces of memories) in the mind of the reader, such as the traces/memories of suffering, memories of romantic stories, etc., and once these are activated, the associated emotions, i.e., memories of suffering resulting in feeling of sorrow, etc., seep into consciousness — again not as ideas but more as feelings — and a sort of repeated, patterned activation of such traces by the characters of the literary work tends to result in a more pronounced and continuous experience of that particular *rasa*.<sup>26</sup> Kālidāsa is one poet who is said to have used *dhvani* suggestion in his plays as a means to activate the ‘memory’ of a spectator to foster a dialectical relationship between himself and the ‘play-world’ leading to his/her experiencing *rasāsvāda* (aesthetic relish).

The earliest of the *Mahākāvyas* was written by Aśvaghoṣa in the 1<sup>st</sup> century AD. He, a brāhmin poet and philosopher who had converted to Buddhism, had written two *Kāvyas*: *Buddhacarita* (*Life of the Buddha*), and *Saundarānanda* (the story of Sundari and Nanda). Though *Buddhacarita* is meant for instructing the reader to move away from the sensuous life and follow the Buddha’s path, it is at its best in describing that very life. For instance, foreseeing the effect of young Gautama on the world, the sage narrates it to the King, the father of Gautama thus: “To sorrow-afflicted, object-laden souls, stuck in the scrubby ruts of *samsara*, he will tell a way out, as if to travellers who had lost their way”<sup>27</sup> (1.72). It is his *Buddhacarita*, translated into Tibetan and Chinese, that perhaps moved the Theravāda branch of Buddhism away from Pāli to the Sanskrit language to articulate their philosophy. According to scholars, he is very adept as a poet on a par with Kālidāsa, as is evident from the way he narrates the four noble truths of Buddha in brief, thus: *iti duḥkham etad* (this is suffering), *iyam asya samudaya-latā pravartikā* (this is the tangled mass of causes producing it), *sāntir iyam* (this is cessation), *ayam upāya iti* (here is a means). Although compared to later *Kāvyas*, his style is said to be fairly simple, with his command over the intricacies of prosody and the subtleties of grammar and vocabulary, he set the tone for future *Mahākāvya* authors.

It is with the arrival of Kālidāsa at the beginning of the 5<sup>th</sup> or 6<sup>th</sup> century that *Kāvya* literature acquired greater excellence and the height of perfection. Kālidāsa is known for his easy-flowing natural language and simplicity of expression that is consistent with perspicuity. He is known for embellishing his poetry with similes unparalleled for their beauty and appropriateness. His work is also known for pithy general sayings. The most distinguished *Kāvyas* of Kālidāsa are *Raghuvamśa* (*Dynasty of Raghu*) and



*Kumārasambhava* (Birth of the War-God). *Raghuvamśa*, spreading to 19 cantos, describes the life of Rāmā, together with an account of his forefathers and successors. It is supposed to have been written by Kālidāsa when he was of greater maturity. According to Sanskrit rhetoricians, it is the best specimen of *Mahākāvya* in which we find a fine balance between narrative and description. Pundits often quote a verse from this epic to describe his adeptness at framing similes: *Samcārīṇī dīpa-śikheva rātrau, yam yam vyatīyāya patimvarā sā, narendra-mārga-aṭṭa iva prapede, vivaṛṇa-bhāvam sa sa bhūmipālaḥ* (6-67). Here, the poet says that when a lamp is taken down a king's way, the houses in front are bright and those left behind are wrapped in darkness. So the kings, whom Indumati is yet to pass by, are bright and happy, while kings she has passed by are gloomy and depressed.

*Meghadūta*, a poem of 120 stanzas that were composed in *Mandākrāntā* (advancing slowly) metre, is another important work of Kālidāsa. Commenting on it, A B Keith,<sup>28</sup> a noted Sanskrit scholar, says: "Indian criticism has ranked *Meghadūta* highest amongst Kālidāsa's poems for brevity of expression, richness of content and power to elicit sentiment, and the praise is not undeserved".

The *Kumārasambhava* is another great *Kāvya* of Kālidāsa. Here Kālidāsa, portrays Uma's failure to conquer Siva with her sheer beauty. It is only when her love is transformed into spiritual devotion through penance that she can win Siva's heart, perhaps articulating that true love is not a mere passing fancy of physical beauty but is a union of two souls sublimated by penance and sacrifice. Here, it is in order to recall an interesting observation made by some scholars: "Owing to the patternised form of life enjoined by the *smritis*, the scope of life depicted in the *Kāvyas* became narrow and limited". It is also observed that most of the *Kāvya* literature was supposed to have been motivated by the three cardinal principles of Hindu culture: *dharma*, *artha* and *kāma*. Over it, the poets, having taken the theme of the *Kāvya* from the *Purānas* and older epics, could not inject fresh life into them as they themselves had but little life, by virtue of leading their lives by the dictates of *Smṛuti*. As a result, "Sanskrit poetry not only became artificial but also followed a traditional scheme of description[...]"<sup>29</sup> Kālidāsa is no exception to this phenomenon, but now and then he, carrying tradition lightly, exhibited his personality in his works, which can be gauged from the verse in which he gives an erotic, voluptuous, but beautiful, expression to a falling raindrop on meditating Parvati in *Kumārasambhava*, all to highlight the intense meditation of Parvati on her Lord, Siva: "*stithāha śaṇam paśmasu, tāditādharāha, payōdharōtsēdha nipāta chūrnitāha, valīshu tasyāha skhalitāha prapēdirē, chirēna nābhim prathamoda*

*bindavaha* (The first drop of rain stayed momentarily on her eyelids, dropped on her lips, shattered on her hard breasts and trickled down the triple fold of her stomach and after a long time disappeared in her navel)".<sup>30</sup>

Traditionally, scholars have identified six exemplary *Mahākāvyas*, viz., *Kumārasambhava*, *Raghuvamśa*, and *Megadūta* of Kālidāsa, *Kirātārjuniya* of Bhāravi, *Śisupālavadha* of Māgha, and *Naisadhacarita* of Śrīharṣa. Bhāravi hails from the 6<sup>th</sup> century. His *Kirātārjuniya* (of Arjuna and the Mountain Man), an epic of 18 cantos, is based on an episode of the *Mahābhārata* in which Arjuna battles with Siva in the disguise of a hunter, and acquires Pāsupatāstra, a divine bow and arrow. He is praised for his depth of thought, his command over language, his stately phrases, and his grace and polish of diction. He portrays the sentiment of heroism admirably, and presents forests and mountains through brilliant images. Māgha, a poet of the post-Kālidāsa period, retells *Śisupālavadha*, an episode from the *Mahābhārata* in which Krishna kills Śisupāla, quite ornately. He is known for his knowledge of grammar, the artificiality of his style, and avoiding the use of same word a second time. Śrīharṣa of the 12<sup>th</sup> century is the author of many works, but among them only the *Naisadhacarita* (*Life of King Nala*) is now available. Being a scholar in various *Śāstras*, he embellishes his *Naisadhacarita* with similes and topics from the *śāstras*, making it a difficult text to understand without the help of a commentary. There are a few other poets, such as Kumaradāsa, Bhatti, Ratnākara, Kavirāja, Padmagupta, Dandin, Bāna, etc., who wrote *Kāvyas*. There are also a few prose romances dating from the 6<sup>th</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> centuries that merit mention as *Mahākāvyas*. Short lyric forms, such as *Subhāsta* by Bartruhari, large collections of *Stotra* — devotional lyrics such as *Sūryastaka* by Mayūra, *Saundaryalahari* of Sankara, *Kṛṣṇakarnāmṛta* of Bilvamangala, etc., have come up during this period.

Although Sanskrit literature dominates the classical period, literature in *Prākṛit* and *Pāli* languages equally merits attention. *Pāli* and *Prākṛit* works are, of course, more of a religious nature than of literary intent. *Pāli* is used mostly by the Theravāda school of Buddhism for their sacred canon. Many *jātaka* tales written in the *Pāli* language narrating the life incidents of Buddha in his previous lives within the ambit of Buddhism are noteworthy. *Gāthāsaptasatī*, one of the earliest anthologies of Indian poetry, was written in *Prākṛit* by a Śātavāhana King, Hāla, in the 2<sup>nd</sup> century CE. It is claimed by some pundits that “*Parushā samskruta bandhāḥ* (Sanskrit texts are tough)”, while “*prākṛuta bandhō hi bhavati sukumāraḥ* (texts in *Prākṛit* are soft)” and the difference between them is: “*purusha mahilānām yāvat, ihāntaram tāva dēthēśhām* (as much as that of the difference between men and women)”. Mehrotra (2008)<sup>31</sup> observed that Sanskrit poets like Kālidāsa

“drew on *Prākṛit* conventions and relocated them in their own literatures”. Intriguingly, we come across a verse in Kālidāsa’s *Kumārasambhava* which states that “*Dvidhā prayuktēna c vājmayēna, Saraswati tanmidhunam nunāva, samskāra pūtēna varēnyam, vadhūm sukhagrāhya nibandhanēna* (The goddess of speech, Saraswati praises the couple in a two-fold language: the laudable bridegroom in the grammatically refined Sanskrit, the bride in the easily comprehensible *Prākṛit* language)” (KS 7-90), and this makes a reader wonder if Kālidāsa wants to convey his equal respect for both the languages and their literature. Much of the *Prākṛit* literature has however been lost, as it was not carefully preserved orally, while waning knowledge of the language in the subsequent generations might have hastened the process.

Sanskrit drama is the “epitome of Sanskrit literature, combining great verse with an operatic spectacle, dance, music and mime”.<sup>32</sup> During the classic period, Sanskrit drama developed admirably, duly aided by native treatises on poetics, among which Bharata’s *Nāṭyaśāstra* occupies a predominant position. Its composition is believed to be anywhere between the 6<sup>th</sup> century BCE to the 2<sup>nd</sup> century CE. It prescribed elaborate rules for fixing the objective of the theme of the play, characters through whom it has to be accomplished, development of plot, *Bhāsa* *vidhānam* (the use of language), *vr̥ttivikalpā* (the style and delineation of sentiment), etc. According to Bharatamuni, a drama is meant for “*Duhkhārtānām śramārtānām śokārtānām tapasvinām, viśrānti jananam* (producing satisfaction and rest for the suffering, the fatigued, the wretched and it consoles those that are troubled by grief)”. In Bharatamuni’s view, *rasa* is so vital to the act of dramatic creativity that “*nahī rasādṛte kascidarthah pravartate*<sup>33</sup> [...] (no meaning can be derived without *rasa*)”. According to Indian theoreticians, *rasa* is: “rapture or aesthetic pleasure, intellectual enjoyment, mysterious delight or bliss and illumination”.<sup>34</sup>

The Sāhitya-darpana divides Sanskrit dramas into two classes: *Rūpaka* (of higher order) and *Upārūpaka* (lower order). *Rūpaka* is again sub-divided into 10 types, while the *Upārūpaka* is divided into 18. A play is divided into several acts. Based on the social status, the main characters speak Sanskrit, while minor characters speak *Prākṛit*. Every play begins with an invocation to one or more Gods, and a prologue in which the *Sūtradhāra* (stage manager) discusses with his wife the context of the performance and its nature. The dialogues are in prose, interspersed with verses. In place of the chorus of the Western stage, Sanskrit drama adopts techniques of *viskambha* interludes, such as *Culika* (the intimating speech); *ankāvatāra*: (the transitional scene); *ankamukha*: (the anticipatory scene), etc. *Vidushaka* is the only humorous character through which dramatic humour finds its

expression. Convention excludes the direct representation of death as an incident on the stage, and insists upon the happy ending of a play in *Bharata vākyam* (prayer for a better future).

This however, does not mean that tragedy is not known to Sanskrit dramatists. In Act V of Kālidāsa's *Śākuntalam*, we see the heroine Śākuntala experiencing a conflict with her fate. Here we behold Śākuntala disowned and disgraced by her lord before the full assembly of his court. Her own kith and kin from the hermitage also repudiate her in a most appalling manner, and won't even allow her to return to the hermitage with them. Now what should she do? Where should she go? She has a loving father, but becomes an orphan. She has a king for her husband, yet she now becomes worse than a widow. This is a sure tragedy that shakes us to the very core of our being, and there would hardly be a person whose heart does not melt into tears at Śākuntala's miserable helplessness.

Further, drama, as a work of art is supposed to be a whole, as a cycle, complete in itself. On the other hand, if a drama ends with disastrous consequences, it would appear as a mutilated piece from the world-experience of a Hindu, who, knowing that life has its own ups and downs, remains always hopeful of the final fulfilment. So, other than Bhāsa, all dramatists have always ensured that their plays end on a happy note.

The earliest known dramas to have survived are fragments of plays by Aśvaghoṣa.<sup>35</sup> The oldest complete plays available are those of Bhāsa, who is revered as the father of Sanskrit drama. He was venerated by Kālidāsa, Bāṇa, Rajasekhara, and critics such as Abhinavagupta. His plays exhibit a high degree of theatrical values. His dialogues are short, succinct, and sparkling. Seldom has he sacrificed dramatic urgency for poetic artifices. A classic example of this trait can be seen in his play, *Pratimanātakam*. As Rāma, Lakṣmaṇa, and Sītā walk away to the forest, Bhāsa makes Dasaradha mutter in his lamentation thus: "*Sūrya ivagatō Ramaha, Sūryam divasa iva Lakṣmanōnu gathaha, Sūrya divasāvasānēy chaeyva na drusvyatey Sītā* (Alas, Rama has gone away like the Sun, Lakshmana has followed him as the day, Sītā has disappeared like a shadow when the Sun and day are gone!)"

According to Bharata, the object of a drama is two-fold: to give delight and to instruct. Although scholars believe that Kālidāsa gave importance to the former, it must be said that he conveys such instructions as an undertone, as is evident in this scene from his play, *Śākuntalam*, where he brilliantly portrays his conception of true love as transcending all other considerations for those imbued with the highest ideals. As Dushyanta, along with Śākuntala, pays a visit to the sage Mārēcha in the hermitage of Prajāpati to seek his blessings, Mārēcha explains to him why he had to suffer a

temporary loss of memory at the time of Śakuntala's arrival at his court. Only a few minutes earlier, Śakuntala's heart has been disturbed by the offer of the King to restore her lost ring, as is reflected in her reply: "I cannot be sure of this ring. Let my lord himself wear it". But as Mārēcha revealed that the curse of sage Durvāsā was the chief cause of the King's unfortunate loss of memory, Śakuntala feels as though a heavy burden has been lifted from her heart, as she says to herself: "Thank God, My Lord has not been without real reason for his rejection of me [...]". Her sigh indicates that her love cannot be satisfied without utter sincerity and truth, and the poet brings out this fact, skilfully, through the dialogue, to assure us of the sublimity of Śakuntala's love. Such tragic and pathetic scenes are common to many of the extant plays.

There are many other dramatists such as Śūdraka, Harsha, Dinnāga, Visākhadatta and Bhavabhūti, whose productions are still relished by the literati. After Bhavabhūti, though there were playwrights such as Bhatta Narāyana, Murāri, Rājasekhara and Krisnamisra, it is observed that the quality of Sanskrit drama declined.

Another noteworthy feature of Sanskrit plays is the simultaneous development of poetics through commentaries on Bharatamuni's *Nāṭyaśāstra*, such as those of Bhatta, Abhinavagupta, Dhanañjaya, Visvanātha, Ānandavardhana, etc., who laid a strong foundation for dramatic art in ancient India. It is indeed said by Krishna Chaitanya, author of *Sanskrit Poetics*, that "in India, poetics evolved out of dramaturgy". However, a huge amount of Sanskrit literature is said to have been lost, for, unlike the texts of *Vedas*, *Kāvya* literature appears to have not been given due attention to preserve it orally. It is in order here to refer to Dimock Jr *et al.*<sup>36</sup> who pointed out that "90 percent of Indian literature has been eaten by white ants".

Although some scholars opine that Sanskrit literature has mainly achieved greatness in religion and philosophy, the fact remains that *Kāvya* literature too, which, as Keith<sup>37</sup> observed, meant "for the audience of experts, aimed to please by subtlety, not simplicity of effect", has equally achieved excellence. However, this remark points out that to appreciate Sanskrit literature, one must have, as Macdonell (1900)<sup>38</sup> observed: "seen the tropical plains and forests of Hindustan steeped in intense sunshine or bathed in brilliant moonlight; experienced the feelings of the monsoon; seen the beauty of *vasant* spring as portrayed by the mango tree, the red Aśoka, the orange Kadamba and the creepers twined to them; and heard the sonorous cooing of the cuckoo that was intoxicated by chewing the tender shoots of mango tree. In short, "one must be acquainted with all the sights and sounds of Indian landscape". Otherwise, the different kinds of lotus, the mention of each of which was meant to convey a different picture, or a

different mood, will all remain as mere names. Intriguingly, different poets approached the same nature from diverse points of view, describing it in different images, cadences of rhyme, and jingling alliterations of word sounds, making its appreciation even more difficult to a new reader. But to the trained ear, it sounds enthrallingly musical, and, if read properly, with the right understanding, they induce a sense of exhilaration.

Leaf and flower, dewdrop and glow-worm, lightning and running brooks, deer and peacocks have all found such an affectionate place in Kālidāsa's heart that they frequently make their presence felt in his poetry, as much as the human characters. If he admires the wavelets in the river, he cannot but fondly trace their close association with the intermittently throbbing eyebrows of a sweetheart. If Kālidāsa's Śakuntala goes for a parting hug with a creeper in its encircling arms, she does not go as a patronising queen, but more with *sōdarya snēham* (sisterly love). We quite often come across such subtle niceties in the behaviour of the protagonists of Sanskrit literature. In *Kumara Sambhava*, Kālidāsa portrays yet another cultural nuance of India. We witness the *nāyika*, Uma, undertaking steadfast penance to win the love of Lord Siva. After a prolonged observance of her devotion, Siva, pleased with her sublime love, exclaims his readiness to espouse her: "O gentle Maiden, wise and true of soul, Lo, now I bend beneath thy sweet control! Won by thy penance, and thy holy vows, Thy willing slave Siva before thee bows!"<sup>39</sup> But much against the expectant readers' longing to witness the consummation of that natural love between them, the poet, perhaps, in his anxiety to keep up the traditional woman's restraint in love, in order to maintain the dignity of their parents, makes gentle Uma bade her maiden prayer: "Wait the high sanction of Himālaya's [her father's] will, and ask his daughter from the royal hill".<sup>40</sup> That is the grace of Uma's love in its exalted mood! Such cultural niceties, and the aesthetic pleasure thereof, are enjoyed more by *Sahrudayas* (knowledgeable readers). An awareness of these distinctive features of Indian culture, particularly of the history and finer nuances of Sanskrit literature are thus considered necessary to facilitate an easy navigation through its texts, besides enabling a reader to enjoy its aesthetic pleasure. Let us begin.