

# GLIMPSES OF SANSKRIT LITERATURE

*Edited by*  
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## Public Poetry in Sanskrit

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### I

For more than a millennium, and over an expanse of space that stretched from the environs of Kabul to Prambanan on the plains of central Java, Sanskrit poets covered the world with poetry.<sup>1</sup> If one were alive in the year 1000, one would have seen public poems in Sanskrit engraved everywhere, on the sides of village tanks or stepwells or modest shrines, on the ubiquitous copper-plate grants recording royal gifts, on vast stone pillars or walls looming up from gigantic architectural wonders on Mount Abu in Gujarat, Gangakondacolapuram in Tamil Nadu, or Angkor in Cambodia. Sanskrit poets—not necessarily “Indian” poets but poets who wrote in Sanskrit—created a world like no other, a world thoroughly saturated with poetry.

The story of how this all came about, how Sanskrit travelled this vast distance, how it came to be used for public poetic texts, and what these texts are like, has never been told in the detail and with the care it merits. It is not in fact even clear whether it has been recognized that there is a story to tell. There are a number of factors for this neglect. For one thing, the assumption seems almost commonplace that Sanskrit had always, to one degree or another,

been used for poetry—or rather, that what came to be called poetry, *kāvya*, had always been written in Sanskrit—and so scholars have failed to give due attention to the historical process in the growth of Sanskrit, especially public Sanskrit poetry, that we actually have the evidence to trace. For another thing, virtually all modern readers of these public poems have been uninterested in them as texts, and have only used them as documents to be mined for reconstructing the economic or social or political history of southern Asia. These histories of course ask important questions, but one could argue that what has been ignored in their favour is the defining feature of these inscriptions, namely, their literariness. Not only has some very good, at times wonderfully moving, poetry often unlike anything else available in the language thereby been lost to modern readers, but our sense of what poetry meant in the social and political domains of many communities in this part of the world has perforce remained rudimentary. For if we do not ask, as we have not yet asked, why every man who came to rule—and not just rulers, but many others who sought the distinction of self-presentation in some permanent public form—found it desirable or indeed necessary to express himself in Sanskrit poetry, we are missing something central to the ways and visions of life in southern Asia before modernity.

## II

As every student of Indian culture knows, the world of public texts in the subcontinent largely begins with the Prākṛit inscriptions of Aśoka, around 275-50 before the common era. (I say “largely” because it has recently been argued that certain old Tamil cave inscriptions in the Brāhmī script may narrowly predate the Aśokan texts). What is not often realized is that for the entire following period of nearly *four hundred years* not only are no literary inscriptions produced in Sanskrit but there are only a handful of inscriptions in Sanskrit altogether, and of these a mere two or three were issued from royal courts. The half-dozen or so Sanskrit documents that have been discovered to date are very exiguous, and are used exclusively to record a sacral event, the establishment of a ritual precinct, a sacrificial post-memorial (*yūpa*), or the like. All other public texts, of which we have a great number both from the Sātavāhana world in the Deccan (ca. 230 BCE - 230 CE) and that of the



Kuṣāṇa in the north (from about 50 BCE to ca. 250 CE), are composed in various forms of middle Indic. What this evidence suggests is assuredly not that “standard” Sanskrit was obsolescent let alone unknown but that its use in the public or *laukika* domain was scrupulously avoided or, if used at all, then in a highly restricted manner. Indeed, I think there is reason to believe that the use of Sanskrit for poetry as such—again more correctly, what would come to be known as poetry, that is, *kāvya*—may have been avoided, too.

The state of affairs as we can read them off the epigraphical record for these four centuries seems to be substantially corroborated by what else we know of the growth of Sanskrit culture. A great deal of evidence points to the restriction of Sanskrit, from early on, to the domain of sacral activity and its ancillary knowledges (its special propriety for the liturgical sphere is certainly the primary connotation of its very name), and this is the inference to which we are led by such historical events as the Buddhist rejection of Sanskrit in favour of non-hieratic “vernacular” languages. As for *kāvya* in Sanskrit we have great difficulty discovering any of it before the beginning of the common era. The single text that actually cites such poetry is the *Mahābhāṣya* of Patañjali, which provides us with a dozen half- or quarter-line quotations. The problem here is that it is not easy to date Patañjali’s work with any real confidence. If we ask what Sanskrit poets have remembered and memorialized about the beginnings of their own tradition; if, for example, we comb through later poetic eulogies in Sanskrit texts—for from the time of Bāṇa if not earlier it becomes the fashion to preface one’s literary creation with a praise of poets past (*kavipraśamsā*)—we will discover that no Sanskrit poet transmits the name of any poet we can securely place before the beginning of the common era.

The sole exception, of course, is Vālmiki’s *Rāmāyaṇa*. But here, I think, we may want to take seriously the work’s own self-presentation as something unprecedented in the cultural history of India. Although so far as I can tell from the manuscripts collected for the critical edition, the text does not use the term “first poem” (*ādikāvya*) in reference to itself (this seems to be a somewhat later tradition, though one whose origins are hard to pinpoint), it does claim novelty. The *Rāmāyaṇa* sees itself as inventing the first formally ordered—versified and regularized (*pādabaddha*, *akṣarasama*)—linguistic representation of *everyday human experience* (clearly coded



in Vālmiki's celebrated etymology, *śokārtasya pravṛtto me śloko bhavatu*). Although it is notoriously difficult to determine the date of what may be termed the "monumental" version of the text (the term by which I refer to the work that synthesized earlier versions and gave a kind of grand shape to the narrative as a whole, and that the tradition has attributed to Vālmiki), most level-headed scholarship today favours the later Śuṅga world, or around the first century before the common era.

Now, something quite breathtaking happens around this time, or within a few generations. The transformation is signalled by a grand inscription—originally eleven by five feet in size—on the rock face at Mount Girnar in Gujarat. It is juxtaposed to a number of Aśokan edicts from the middle of the third century BCE, and to an inscription of King Skandagupta of 458 CE. The huge rounded granite boulder speaks seven hundred years of Indian cultural history, but it is the *praśasti* or eulogistic poem (a prose poem, in this case) from the court of the Kṣatrapa king Rudradāman, dated to 150 CE, that I want to focus on here. The king uses the occasion of his repair of a great public waterworks, the reservoir called Sudarśana that had been damaged in a storm, to compose a Sanskrit poem celebrating his own political and cultural achievements.

... the water, churned by a furious storm, like the storm at the end of time,  
 leveled the hills, uprooted trees and tore down embankments,  
 turrets, towers, shelters—scattered and broke to pieces (...)  
 and the stones and trees and shrubs and vines lay strewn about everywhere ...

He who from the womb possessed the splendour of consummate royalty,  
 to whom all castes resorted and chose as their lord;  
 he who vowed—a vow he kept—to take no life except in battle (...)  
 but never hesitates to strike an equal foe who faces him in combat;  
 he who rules as lord of eastern and western Ākarāvanti, Anūpa country, Ānarta,  
 Saurāṣṭra, Śvabhara, Maru, Kachcha, Sindhusauvira, Kukura, Aparānta, Niṣāda, and other areas gained by his valor,  
 and everywhere—town, market, countryside—

is untouched by trouble from robbers, snakes, wild beasts, or disease. . .

he who (composes) prose and verse, clear and pleasant, sweet and charming,

adorned with figures and stamped by proper use of language; whose body is beautiful and marked with most excellent marks and signs . . .

He, Mahākṣatrapa Rudradāman . . . by a vast sum of money from his own treasury and in good time, strengthened the dam and lengthened it,

three times greater than before (. . .)

and far more beautiful now has Lake Beautiful become.

The text of this inscription has been known for more than a century and a half, since James Prinsep first published it in 1838. What I think may not yet have been adequately appreciated, however, is the fact that in all the hundred and fifty years since Prinsep—a period that has witnessed an intensive hunt for inscriptions throughout South Asia, issuing in forty-two volumes of *Epigraphia Indica*, eight volumes of *Corpus Inscriptionum Indicarum*, and countless other reports of inscriptional finds from archaeological investigations around the subcontinent—virtually nothing has been discovered to diminish the cultural-historical significance of Rudradāman's work. (The one exception may be the Mora stepwell inscription published by Lüders in 1937-38, but this pushes back by only a few generations the transition to public Sanskrit whose invention, I want to argue, constitutes a new moment in South Asian cultural history).

The appropriation of Sanskrit for purposes that are *political* and *public* around the beginning of the common era, as evidenced in the materials I adduce above, is an event that, whether as symptom or cause, announces a radical transformation of the historical sociology of Sanskrit. In this process newly settled immigrants from northwestern India, the Kṣatrapas, seem to participate centrally. The outstanding French scholar Louis Renou may have been right to argue years ago that it is likelier "foreign" kings consecrated rather than originated the vogue of literary Sanskrit, and others have reminded us that their use of public Sanskrit may be more a concomitance with other developments rather than a cause of them. Yet the evidence we actually possess suggests that others may be



right to find in the Kṣatrapas an innovating force. But what I find to be really historically important is not so much that newcomers from Iran and Central Asia should begin to participate in the prestige economy of Sanskrit, since other communities over time had been easily incorporated into Indian, indeed Sanskrit cultural communities, but rather that they and others begin to turn Sanskrit into an instrument of polity and the mastery of Sanskrit into a source of political charisma.

This is very new, and I think we must be clear about this novelty. When one scholar, in a recent census of some Kṣatrapa inscriptions, remarks on the “prestige that the Indian civilization of Madhyadeśa had for these tribal chiefs of Swat”, we might be led to assume that these “tribal chiefs” just pick up “Indian civilization” as if it were lying about already full-formed. What happens instead, I think, is that they helped to create this civilization by employing Sanskrit in a way that earlier would have been unimaginable. They make political poetry—and public poetry—in a language that had never been used for that purpose. Never before had a king in India spoken (or been made to speak) publicly in the voice of Sanskrit *kāvya*. And after this point for the next thousand years, this is the voice that would be dominant in South and Southeast Asia.

### III

The speed with which and the distances to which, after the second century, the new habit of composing public poetry in Sanskrit spread through the world, and the particular factors that seem to have been at work in this process, seem to me to constitute a cultural transformation comparable to no other in world history.

As I have noted, prior to the innovations around the first or second century CE, virtually all public records besides a few inscriptions commemorating sacrificial events were composed in one or another form of Prākṛit. I use the term “records” here in the strict sense. Prākṛit-language records do not, as I will suggest the Sanskrit texts strive to do, *interpret* the world; they simply intend to *document* it or even to establish it (for example, by declaring the boundaries of a land grant). Accordingly, not a single one of them is versified—versification being one of the markers, though by no means an exclusive marker, of expressivity in a text—and only one or two of them, from the Sātavāhana kingdom, could be said to be

prose poetry. Sanskrit public poetry begins with the prose poetry of Rudradāman's inscription. Versified poetry (leaving aside the Mora step-well inscription mentioned earlier, which has more to do with an earlier sacral use of the language than with the habit that replaced it) begins to appear from about the end of the third century, with the Kānākherā stone inscription of Śrīdharavarman (who describes himself as *mahādaṇḍanāyakena śakena*, "a Scythian appointed as regional governor"). In northern India, Sanskrit once adopted utterly displaces all other local languages from the realm of inscriptional discourse after the fourth century; it alone becomes the language used both for documenting and interpreting the world. In the South, where as we shall see Sanskrit divides up its linguistic labour with local languages, the latter are excluded from the domain of the poetic, until such time (variously in the ninth-eleventh centuries) as political-cultural conditions allow or demand otherwise.

It is striking how quickly Sanskrit, once it comes to be used for public poetry in the north in the second-third century, is adopted elsewhere. Prākṛit is abandoned, and abandoned permanently, in northern India after around 300. In the upper Deccan among the Vākāṭakas, the last Prākṛit inscription dates from 355 CE. In the case of the Ikṣvāku kings of Andhra, who succeeded the Sātavāhana dynasty about 225 CE, the first forty of their records are in Prākṛit; three Sanskrit texts appear only later, the likely date being the fourth century. Further south, in Tamil Nadu, the picture is even clearer, since we can trace the linguistic preferences of the Pallavas continuously over a 600-year period. Their records begin near the end of the third century with documents in Prākṛit (a rather peculiar kind of Prākṛit, in fact). This remains the fashion until the end of the century, when Sanskrit is adopted, never to be abandoned (indeed, there is no going back to Prākṛit anywhere for the purpose of public discourse). One last example is furnished by the Kadambas of western Karnataka. They continue to write public documents in Prākṛit through the middle of the fourth century; by the middle of the next, however, they move irreversibly to Sanskrit.

At the same time that this turn to Sanskrit for the creation of a public poetry is taking place in the Indian subcontinent—in fact, with striking simultaneity—we find the same thing happening in what are now the nations of Burma, Thailand, Cambodia, Laos, Vietnam, Malaysia and Indonesia (Sumatra, Borneo and Java).



Sanskrit culture, in a real sense, is being created in different if closely related ways in North India, South India, and Southeast Asia at virtually the same time. And while the culture of Sanskrit public poetry dies out rather quickly in Burma, somewhat more slowly in Thailand and Champa (south Vietnam), it continues to be produced for centuries elsewhere: the last dated Sanskrit inscription in Cambodia, for instance, is around 1295 CE, a little before the abandonment of Angkor. In Java, royal texts in Sanskrit are produced in some quantity until the ninth century, though they are occasionally found as late as the middle of the fifteenth.

I want to elaborate on a point made briefly above that once Sanskrit became a language for the public and poetic expression of political will, it remained for many centuries the only language used for that purpose. When other languages are permitted to speak in the public domain, so to put it, it is only to document and specify. In the north, in fact, "local" languages are never granted even this permission, except at the beginning and the end of the epoch of Sanskrit: The last Prākṛit inscription of the Vākāṭakas (355 CE) is a good example of the fashion that will be maintained elsewhere if not in the north. Here, the genealogical portion, which is not quite "interpretative" but still rhetorical, is composed in Sanskrit, the business portion, concerning a grant of land to a number of Brāhmaṇas, is in Prākṛit (One thing this record shows, by the way—and this is something we find in many other places throughout this era—is that by this period the fashion of Sanskrit is pan-social, there no longer remains any necessary concomitance between Brāhmaṇism and Sanskrit, or non-brāhmaṇism and Prākṛit. The sole concomitance has to do with *discursive purposes*—Sanskrit for expressivity, even where Buddhists are concerned, as the occasional Sanskrit public text from Nāgārjunakoṇḍa shows; Prākṛit for documentation, even where brāhmaṇas are concerned—rather than with what once may have been social-linguistic communities). For perhaps a thousand years from this point on, local languages in the north will be banished from the royal public record. At the end of this period, a change in sensibilities occurs in the north, a growing awareness that the Sanskrit epoch is over. One of the first texts I have found that registers this change is a Mewar inscription of AD 1489: "In accordance with the king's command, we now write a few lines in our regional language, which is easily understandable to those not skilled in the gods' speech" (*gīrvāṇavāṇyām avicakṣaṇair*

*narais sukhāvaseyāni vacāṃsi kānicit/sadeśabhāṣām* [read: *svadeśabhāṣām*] *anusṛtya bhūpater anujñayā lekhapatham nayāmahe*!).

Even more eloquent about the poetic privileging of Sanskrit is the inscriptional record in South India. Despite its ancient literary history Tamil is not admitted at all into the Pallava public record until the middle of the sixth century, or two hundred years after the founding of the dynasty; even then, it is used exclusively for the pragmatic portions of the grant, its practical contents. Throughout the 600 year existence of the Pallava dynasty, not a single inscription in Tamil was produced that does anything but the work of documenting the everyday—announcing a remission of taxes, specifying the boundaries of a land-grant, acknowledging the receipt of goods, recording the transaction of a village council, registering the sale of land. Only with the Colas in the early eleventh century will Tamil take on tasks beyond the pragmatic. The same holds true in the world of Kannada. Neither the Kadambas nor the western Gangas nor the Bādāmī Cālukyas use Kannada for anything but documentary purposes; it is not until the middle of the tenth century, with Krishna III of the Rāṣṭrakūṭa dynasty, that Kannada has a literary role to play. (The reasons for this development, what I call the vernacularization of southern polities, are the subject of another essay.)

In Southeast Asia, the world of public poetry remains a world of Sanskrit. Although old Khmer is found along with Sanskrit in dated inscriptions from the very beginning of recorded literacy in the country (early seventh century), it is used only to detail the concrete terms or conditions of royal grants. Old Javanese does not appear in public documents until the early ninth century, or at least 400 years after the first documents; after that date, and very quickly, Javanese becomes increasingly and then exclusively the language used in official documents. But the inscriptional materials in Old Javanese are virtually without exception documentary and not interpretative texts. This is even more striking in view of the existence, from the tenth century on, of a brilliant literary efflorescence in the language, the so-called *kakawin* (*kāvya*) literature (such literized poetry seems to be absent in Cambodia until well after the end of Angkor).



## IV

Not only does the spread of political Sanskrit happen with extraordinary speed and over a vast space, but, as I mentioned, it also happens in a way that seems to me to be quite without parallel in world history.

First, no organized political power such as the Roman imperium underwrote the conquest of Sanskrit. There occurred no internal or external Indian "colonization", in any remotely acceptable use of that term, of South India or Southeast Asia. There were no demographically meaningful migrations of the subjects of any Indian polity, no military conquests, no ties of political subservience, no material dependency or exploitation of which we have even a shred of evidence. Second, Sanskrit was carried by no coherent scripture-based religion such as Islam; no religious revolution took place during this period with any vast or systematic proselytization of this space following in its wake. Quite the contrary, Sanskrit's diffusion was effected, it seems, by small numbers of traditional intellectuals, often following in the train of scattered groups of traders and adventurers, and carrying with them, besides the full panoply of Sanskrit cultural monuments such as grammars, lexicons, epics, and courtly poems—all of which make themselves felt in the poetic inscriptions themselves—the disparate and decidedly uncanonized texts of a wide variety of competing religious orders.

Third, there is no evidence whatever that Sanskrit ever became a language-of-trade—a bridge language or link language, a koiné language or lingua franca—like other imperial languages such as Greek, Latin, Arabic, Persian, Chinese. During this period I find nothing to suggest that, outside the scholastic arena, Sanskrit was ever an everyday medium of communication in South Asia let alone Southeast Asia. Fourth, and closely related to this, we have no reason to believe that Sanskrit ever functioned as a language-of-state—if by that we mean the administrative functions of a language, e.g., the medium of chancellery communication—certainly not in Southeast Asia, almost certainly not in South India. What is created in the period that covers roughly the millennium between 300-1300 is a cultural formation that seems anomalous in antiquity, a kind of "community" without intensive communion, globalized as any culture before modernity was, based largely on a shared, if locally inflected, commitment to certain features of culture, which I have

taken to calling the Sanskrit cosmopolis, or Sanskrit cultural ecumene.

But if none of the conditions usually required for the spread of a linguistic medium and idiom obtains in the case of Sanskrit, what does account for it? And what cultural work did the ubiquitous public poetic texts of Sanskrit *do*?

Here we confront one of the more profound questions of Indian cultural history, and at present I can do no more than offer a set of hypotheses. One place to start is by recognizing that Sanskrit became a key feature in a widely shared repertory of culture in a peculiar kind of empire system of premodernity. In the system of nation-states of modernity, the structure of the system itself produces a number of cultural effects: one cannot, for example, have a "nation" as currently understood without at the same time having a singular language in which to represent it, and thus the elevation and standardization of one dialect are systemic features of nationalism. Similarly, in the empire-system of premodernity, at least as it seems to have operated in much of South and Southeast Asia, imperial culture and self-understanding—in a word, the ability to qualify as imperial polity—required demonstrated mastery of a language of cosmopolitan character. This had to be a language of *transethnic* attraction, transcending even the ethno-identity of the ruling elites themselves. It had to be a language capable of making *translocal* claims (beyond the local claims that were within the province of *deśabhāṣā*) of what has insightfully been called "limited universal sovereignty." It had to be a language powerful not so much because of its numinous qualities (I find little in the epigraphs we actually possess to suggest that Sanskrit was prized because of its supposed transcendent character; it is certainly false to assert, as some do, that the audience of public poetry was the gods!), but because of its aesthetic qualities, its ability somehow to make reality more real—more complex and more beautiful—as evinced by its literary idiom and style, and a literary history that embodies successful exemplars of such linguistic alchemy.

It had, moreover, to be a language dignified and stabilized by grammar. Only in such a language, and not one unconstrained by grammar and therefore constantly in danger of degenerating, could the fame of the ruler expect to receive permanent, indeed, eternal expression. But there is more to grammaticality than just this kind of simple quasi-functionalism, something deeper rooted. In a way,



the order of Sanskrit poetry was the order of Sanskrit grammar—the greatest linguistic achievement in all antiquity, and perhaps since—and that order was a model or prototype of the moral, social and political order. A just (*sādhu*) king was a king who used and promoted the use of correct language (*sādhushabda*), in the same way that, to appeal to the great philosopher Kumārila in his critique of Pāli Buddhism, it is only by using a language whose form is true (*sad*) that one can possibly speak the truth (*satya*). Not only was Sanskrit thus the appropriate vehicle for the expression of royal will, but Sanskrit learning itself became a crucial component of kingliness. This trope of the learned king is very widespread and long-standing. We can trace it from Rudradāman in second century Gujarat, “he who won wide fame by his theoretical and practical mastery and retention of the great knowledges, grammar and the rest” (*śabdārtha*-. . .] *vidyānām mahatīnām pāraṇadhāraṇavijñānaprayogāvāptavipulakīrti*-), to Bhoja in tenth century Dhārā, “he who was wise in all aspects of literature” (*niḥśeṣavānmayavid*), Saṅjaya in eighth century Java, “he who understood the finest points of the shastras” (*śāstrasūkṣmārthavedi*-), and Sūryavarman in eleventh century Angkor,

He whose mind itself seemed truly a moving body, with the [Great] Commentary [of Patañjali] and the rest [of the grammatical treatises] for its feet, [the two kinds of] poetry for its hands, the six systems of philosophy for its senses, *dharmśāstra* for its head (*bhāṣyādicaraṇā kāvyapāṇiḥ śaḍdarśanendriyā/yanmatih dharmśāstrādīmadastakā jaṅgamāyate* [sic leg.]).

I have already called attention to how central is the literariness of Sanskrit public poetry, and I want to return to it briefly. Clearly Sanskrit was not used to give expression to what we might call politics as material power. The power embodied in the languages-of-state for purposes of taxation, for example, was always inclined to speak in the so-called vernacular idioms. Sanskrit was used to give expression to politics as aesthetic power. In public texts Sanskrit alone is permitted to be the language of the figure of sense (of simile, metaphor, and above all *śleṣa* or double-entendre); it alone is the language of the figure of sound (alliteration in all its varieties) and the language of metrics (the controlled deployment over time of recognizable patterns of phonemes). These functions

separate the object of Sanskrit discourse from the world of the everyday, not only for the obvious reason that the everyday world does not contain, except randomly, the figures of sense and sound and metric, but because the everyday world—of village boundaries, freehold conditions, tax exemptions, endowment requirements—is not the place for the activities with which these functions of language are associated: the interpretative, the ambiguous, the polysemic, the imaginative, the persuasive, the captivating. This is by no means to claim that Sanskrit inscriptional discourse does not at the same time make important arguments about reality: about genealogical authenticity and validation, relations of political dominance, royal virtue and royal rights. But as its very form shows, and shows increasingly by growing more complex and learned over time (the influence of Bāṇa and other *śleṣa* poets grows with almost equal intensity in the Deccan and Cambodia), this is not its only purpose: it also is concerned to enhance reality by poetry.

For these reasons we have to begin to realize that these epigraphs are important symbolic as well as discursive gestures. The Western scholars who edited the Cambodian inscriptions, for example—to whom we owe an enormous debt of gratitude for their labours—like Indologists elsewhere working with such records, never cease to complain of what they saw as the sheer inanity of *praśasti* texts. “As impoverished of facts as they are rich in things devoid of interest”, “interminable panegyric”, says one scholar, and many before and after him have agreed. Without interest and interminable to whom? Someone in the Khmer country took care beyond imagining to compose the 218 complex punning verses (in the best tradition of Subandhu and Bāṇa) of Mebon (952 CE) or the 298 of Pre-Rup (961 CE)—indeed, if we are to believe one scholar, to compose it according to the dimensions of a stone surface that had already been selected!—engrave it and erect it in a visible spot in a grand temple complex. More than this, he took care to learn a Sanskrit that deploys all the rhetorical and formal resources of the most complex and sophisticated poetry from the subcontinent (not to mention virtually perfect orthography and grammar whose mastery shows no slackening to the very moment of the disappearance of Sanskrit culture from Cambodia). What else must we have before we begin to take these poems seriously as cultural statements of significance? And when will we begin to see that among the “facts” that are important in these texts is their textuality itself, their celebrating



royal (or other) power through the aesthetic potentialities of a language that projects such power beyond the confines of the local by linking up the local with a cosmopolitan culture of shared aesthetic presuppositions and moral-political commitments?

## V

The discourse of public poetry in Sanskrit differs not only from the public discourse for which regional language could be used, but it also differs in some ways from non-public Sanskrit poetry. I want by way of a few examples to try to capture some of those differences and illustrate a few of the more general features of public Sanskrit poetry that I have been discussing. But I want to preface these examples by a few remarks about the poets themselves.

One of the striking facts about the poets who wrote public poetry is that only rarely do they seem to have been poets of courtly, salon, "private" poetry. We know the names of over three hundred poets who composed inscriptional verses. Of these, I can identify only a handful who are known, whether from extant manuscripts of their works, from being cited in anthologies or named elsewhere, or by their own declaration in an epigraph, to have written literary texts. Of these few only a handful are reasonably well known (Trivikramabhaṭṭa of Mānyakheta, tenth century; Cittapa of Dhārā, late tenth century; Umāpatidhara of Bengal, twelfth century; Śrīpāla of Gujarat, twelfth century; Jayamaṅgala Sūri, thirteenth century). Moreover, many authors of public poetry are clearly identified as men positioned *outside* the literary salon, whether as high officials (*sāndhivigrahika*, attested from the time of Hariṣeṇa, minister of Samudragupta in the fourth century, to that of one Kubera, minister of Netrbhaṅjadeva in the fifteenth century; a *senāpati* composed a *praśasti* to Sūryavarman in 1002 CE), or indeed, members of the royal family (e.g., the princes Sūryakumāra and his brother Virakumāra, authors of twelfth-century *praśastis* on their father, Sūryavarman of Angkor) or less elevated clerks (*kāyastha*, such as a Sūryāditya who signs a public poem of 1128, or one Baijūka of Mathurā two hundred years later). Public and private poetry seem thus, by and large, to have been separate domains of cultural production that rarely intersected.

A second fact about this poetry is that, despite its vast profusion and its pervasion of the Indian cultural sphere—or more justly put,

its role in the creation of that sphere—the theoreticians of literature ignore it totally. It is never discussed in *sāhityasāstra* analyses of literary art in general or genre in particular, with two very minor exceptions. (The commentator Namisādhū on Rudraṭa's *Kāvyaālankāra* is the sole authority to give a definition, but only a definition, of a principal genre of public poetry, the *praśasti* [“a *praśasti* is a eulogy wherein a king's family is described”] and Viśvanātha in his *Sāhityadarpaṇa* defines the *virudam* as “a praise poem for a king composed in verse and prose.”) An unsympathetic reader (such as Ludwik Sternbach, who asserted that the “versifiers” lacked poetic inspiration and their verse is without literary interest) might of course argue that no one considered “public poetry” as *poetry*. Well, no one perhaps except the writers themselves. We find them claiming this status almost from the beginning of the Sanskrit millennium, with the Allahabad Pillar inscription of Samudragupta (before 376 CE), whose author Hariṣeṇa calls his work a *kāvya*; and it continues, from the celebrated Tālagunda inscription of the Kadambas in the south (undated; ca. 455-470 CE),

In deference to the command of King Śāntivarman  
Kubja has written this his own *kāvya*  
upon the face of this rock

to the recently published Bilpank epigraph of Śrīpāla in 1141:

Śrīpāla, emperor of poets and adopted kin  
of King Siddharāja . . .  
composed this superb praise-poem (*praśasti*).

No doubt there were features of inscriptional poetry that accounted to some extent for its usual marginalization by literary elites, features that certainly were a function of the inscriptionality of the texts, if I may put it that way, and that may also, in some way or other, be related to the social location of their producers. But this is also something else at work, in the fabric of the texts themselves. Readers of Sanskrit poetry, as it is found in the great works of the courtly poets and dramatists, sense—and this is a feeling that reaches its fullest theoretical realization in the aesthetic philosophy



of the late tenth-century critic Abhinavagupta—that it presents a language world quite different from any other. What has to strike the reader of this poetry in the first instance is what I would call the attenuated historicity of Sanskrit literary experience, generated above all by the fact that it is not the language of everyday personal experience. It is not the language of childhood, the kitchen, the market, the army; of friendship or love; of memories or dreams. Nor, accordingly, is it the purpose of Sanskrit literature to deal with local habitations and names. It is rather to distill human experience into as generalizable and universalizable account as language can possibly produce. The transcendently beautiful poems of Amaru or Bhartṛhari, nameless and placeless as they are, are perfect expression of this tendency—one so well-known to readers and critics of Sanskrit that it has become something of a cliché.

The character of the public poetry of Sanskrit can be very different from this. It is here that the locally placed, the dated, the particular, the *referential* manifests itself in such abundance and, sometime, power. *Pièces d'occasion* they may by definition be, but the public poetry of Sanskrit tells us something precious about the fuller possibilities of what poetry could do and mean in early India, something that supplements the great canonical works and sets off in relief the latter's own literary purposes and procedures.

## VI

Here is not the place to provide an anthology of inscriptional poetry; this is something I hope to do at some length elsewhere. But in closing let me offer just a very few examples of some of the things I have been trying to suggest. How rare it is to find elsewhere in Sanskrit literature the personal, deeply autobiographical sentiment such as we find constantly in the prose-poem epigraphs of the Bādāmi Cālukyas, as in the following copper-plate record of Vikramāditya II (742 CE):

He became infused with divine energy the moment he was anointed into sovereignty over the entire world, and he resolved to destroy the Pallava, his natural enemy, who had stolen the luster of the former kings of his dynasty.

Straightaway he reached Tuṇḍaka district, where he came face to face with the Pallava, Nandipotavarman. He defeated

him in battle and put him to flight and he got hold of precious things, those musical instruments, the *karumukha* and *samudraghoṣa*, the *khaṭvāṅga* standard, and elephants without peer, drunken, full-grown, celebrated elephants; a treasure of rubies whose rays could shatter the darkness; and a treasure of gold so great it took many men to carry. But he spared Kāñcī, that gorgeous belt of the lovely lady, the South, the place where the sage Agastya was once born in a sacred vessel.

He brought great happiness to brāhmaṇas, the wretched, the fatherless by his unstinting charity. He acquired great spiritual merit by returning vast treasures of gold to the stone temples built by Narasimhapota, like the Rājasimheśvara temple. With the shooting flame of his power he scorched many kings—the Pāṇḍya, Cola, Kerala, Kalabhra and others. And he planted the victory pillar of his fame, brilliant as the autumn moon, at the southern ocean, where waves come boiling at the shore, and the shore shimmers with rays of mounds of pearls loosed from oysters when his dolphin-like elephants, shaken by their fear of the ocean, struck them and broke them open with their trunks . . . .

I have already mentioned the Tālagunda inscription of the time of Śāntivarman. It is carved on a 12-foot high granite pillar set before a temple in Shimoga District, Karnataka, and relates the story of the Kadamba kings, a brāhmaṇa clan of Karnataka, “the sons of Hāritī, who travelled the path of the triple ancient lore,” and ultimately achieve kingship. The first of the clan is Mayūraśarman, whose story begins in his student days, and whose personality emerges from the epigraph with unusual boldness of delineation:

... So Mayūraśarman went down with his guru  
Viraśarman to the city of Pallava kings  
eager to master sacred learning, and enrolled  
as a student in the vedic school.

A heated argument broke out over the horse sacrifice  
of the Pallava king—Mayūraśarman was enraged.  
“How miserable is life in this Kali age, with priests  
become so much weaker than kings.



“It makes no difference how much you please your teachers,  
or how hard you study your sacred texts—to become  
a real brahmaṇa will still depend on the king.  
What could be worse than that?” And so

with a hand trained to handle holy *kuśa* grass,  
kindling for the sacred fire, the mortar  
and ladle, the ghee and oblation pot,  
he drew out a flashing sword, ready to take on the world.

He proceeded to defeat in battle  
the frontier guards of the Pallava kings,  
and occupied the impassable wilderness  
to the very gates of Śrīparvata, Mount of Royal Splendor.

The following verse, by a poet of the Rāṣṭrakūṭa king Indrarāja III writing on copper in the year 914 CE about an earlier king of the dynasty, locates this kind of historical referentiality in popular memory:

When the monsoon clouds gather and the downpour follows  
and the arc of Indra’s bow appears  
old people tell of the time  
Kṛṣṇarāja fought the Gurjaras,  
how in a black rage he spanned his bow  
studded with glittering jewels  
and shot arrows upon the head of enemy heroes,  
and how they howled.

Public poetry is not only the place where a new kind of royal historicity comes to expression. It is also the place for more modest gestures of remembrance and memorialization, such as are rare elsewhere in Sanskrit poetry. Here is a part of a fragmentary commemorative inscription from 510 CE. It is engraved on a pillar found implanted under the trees on the banks of the Bima river in Eran (Sagar District, Madhya Pradesh); the pillar is crowned with the sculpted heads of the husband and wife referred to in the verses, which recount the battlefield death of the man, an official in the Gupta empire:

His son was glorious Goparāja,  
 a man famed for his bravery,  
 the nephew of Śarabharāja  
 and the < . . . > ornament of his dynasty.  
 When Bhānugupta, hero equal to Pārtha,  
 was emperor of the world,  
 they say that Goparāja came with him  
 to this place, in compliance with their pact.  
 He fought brilliantly in battle  
 and went to heaven like a celestial king.  
 In devotion and loyalty  
 his beloved wife ascended the pyre with him,  
 holding him tight.

An undated *praśasti* recording an endowment to the great Buddhist university of Nālandā in southern Bihar (twelfth century)—not the *praśasti* of a king but of a Buddhist cleric hailing from near Rajshahi in Bangladesh (Somapura = Paharpur)—show not only how far the inscriptional habit of public Sanskrit poetry spread beyond the royal centres themselves, but more important, how this poetry embodied deep-felt emotion—indeed, as we read it, the stone seems to speak with an almost palpable sadness:

In Somapura there lived an ascetic  
 named Karunāśrimitra.

He cultivated the Buddhist virtues  
 by showing compassion to all living things  
 and bringing them happiness and welfare.

From Vaṅgāla came armies, they threw fire  
 in his dwelling, and it burst into flames.  
 Clutching the Buddha's lotus feet  
 the ascetic went to heaven.

The intensity of the impulse that prompted Sanskrit poets to cover the world in poetry, far beyond the service to any court, I find represented in the following little verse from perhaps the seventh century. It is incised on a boulder lying at the foot of the Merbabu volcano in central Java, near a spring (the "Tuk Mas" or "Golden



Spring'') that gushes out from its steep and stony walls. The lines stand alone on the rock, doing what Sanskrit poetry can do so well, giving praise to what is beautiful:

Her younger sisters are the pure white lotuses,  
 she gushes from the rock face here  
 and from among the pebbles there, and there  
 pours out her cold clean water,  
 this spring that like the Gaṅgā makes all it touches pure.

In all these instances we find not just a discourse that by its unadorned directness gains forcefulness, sometimes pathos and even a kind of sublimity, but also a quality of localization that strives to fix in the stuff of language, somehow imagined to be as durable as the substance upon which it is incised, a fleeting and very real human moment. Both of these are qualities typically absent from other Sanskrit poetry, which has its own and very different resources to employ in achieving its extraordinary results.

A number of these features, I think, are present in the following two inscriptions of which I provide selections. The first is from the court of King Mānadeva of Nepal (464 CE), inscribed on a tall pillar before the Changu Narayan temple (10 kilometers northeast of Kathmandu). It begins with a genealogy of kings, starting with Vṛṣadeva, and Śaṅkaradeva, and then speaks of Dharmadeva, who "through righteousness alone protected the great kingdom of Nepāla":

His wife was the grand Śrī Rājyavati.  
 She was the offspring of a pure family, a Lakṣmī  
 to his Viṣṇu with all her virtues. And he loved her  
 more than life itself.

< . . . > the king had shed the lustre of his fame  
 over this whole world, but then he left  
 for the realm of the gods—it was peaceful, like a trip  
 to a pleasure garden—but his wife suddenly collapsed,  
 wild with the fever of grief < . . . > utterly immobilized—  
 a woman who before separation from her husband  
 was ever busy with rites and rituals and the feeding of the gods.

Now this Queen Rājyavati—called the king's wife  
but really his royal power incarnate—  
was about to follow her husband,  
her thoughts fixed on the other world.  
She came to her son, Prince Mānadeva, a man  
of faultless conduct, in beauty like the autumn moon  
and like the moon a delight to all the people.  
The words catching in her throat, drawing sighs  
so slowly, her face stained with tears, she said,  
with deep emotion, "Your father has gone to heaven.  
O my son, there is no reason for me to live  
now that your father has passed away. My dear son,  
rule the kingdom, I will take the path  
my husband took, before the day is out.

"How could I live without my husband, held back by the hope—  
which long years of mutual pleasure still arouse—  
of being reunited with him, when that could never be  
more than a dream or mirage? I am going," she said  
with determination. But then her broken-hearted son  
touched his head to her feet in devotion and firmly spoke.

"What use would I have for pleasures, what possible joy  
in living if I were parted from you?  
First I will give up my life—and only then  
can you go from this world to heaven." These words of his,  
moistened with tears from his lotus eyes, were the cords  
of a net that trapped her like a bird. And trapped she stayed . . .

The second is one of the few inscriptional works in India to gain some renown outside the narrow circles of epigraphists and historians. It is carved on a slab of sandstone that had been set in the wall of a staircase leading up to a temple in the small village of Mandasor in Madhya Pradesh; now it is on display in the Guri Mahal Museum, Gwalior. The poem tells the story of the migration of a group of silk-weavers from Lāṭa in southern Gujarat to their new home in Mandasor, in the year 436 CE.

. . . In the land of Lāṭa, the trees bend  
under the weight of their flowers,



there are beautiful temples, royal halls, holy monasteries.  
But the world-famous craftsmen of Lāṭa  
left that land of theirs and its wooded mountains,

attracted by the good king of this region.  
Despite the hardships of the journey,  
they came with great hopes to Daśapura—at first  
only in their daydreams, and then with children and kin . . . .

They formed close associations  
with their neighbors; day by day friendship grew.  
The kings treated them like their own sons,  
and they lived happily in Daśapura.

....  
A girl can be very young and pretty,  
gold at her neck, flowers in her hair and betel  
in her mouth—yet the real beauty only comes  
when she puts on her pair of silks.

And who makes the silk that adorns  
the land far and wide—soft silk,  
with a riot of colors, a true delight to see?  
These craftsmen from Lāṭa.

Yet knowing that the life of man, and wealth,  
however vast, are far more fragile  
than a petal blown from the ear of a forest spirit,  
they made a firm and good decision,

while King Kumāragupta was ruling the earth,

....

and Bandhuvarman was the lord  
protecting the rich town of Daśapura:

With the wealth acquired from their craft  
the guild of silk-weavers would have a temple built'  
a noble temple like no other, in honour of the blazing sun.

....

In the year four hundred ninety three  
from the founding of the Mālava tribe,  
during the time of year  
when clouds begin to rumble

in the month of Sahasya, in the white fortnight,  
the lucky thirteenth day, this place was opened, with hymns of  
praise.

As long as Lord Śiva bears his high pile  
of matted yellow hair and pure crescent moon within;  
as long as the bright lotus garland hangs  
at Viṣṇu's shoulder, this noble house will last.

By order of the guild and with true devotion  
this house of the sun was built;  
and with great care the above was composed  
by Vatsabhāṭṭi.

Foolishly criticized by past scholars as trite, the work of a poetaster, the Mandasor epigraph offers us a rare and memorable chance to hear another voice speak, one usually silenced in Sanskrit literature, and speak with an honest pride and piety we can still admire 1500 years later. And like the other epigraphs I have noticed—a minute selection of the hundreds of thousands available, of which perhaps less than two-thirds have yet been published—this gives eloquent testimony to how Sanskrit poets, participants in one of history's most extraordinary cosmopolitan cultures, made the world alive with poetry.

### Reference

1. The first four sections of this paper are a much abbreviated version, omitting the full presentation of evidence and bibliographical references, of a work in progress, entitled "The Sanskrit Cosmopolis, AD 300-1300: Transculturation, Vernacularization, and the Question of Ideology", that will appear in a volume on the *Ideology and Status of Sanskrit*, ed., J.E.M. Houben (Leiden, forthcoming).