

HOW LITERATURES BEGIN

How Literatures Begin

A GLOBAL HISTORY

EDITED BY

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There are two obvious conceptual complexities that all of us face when trying to make sense of the problem of “the beginning of literature.” In fact, that problem only becomes one when these complexities are understood to be, well, complex. The first complexity is what we mean by “literature,” the second, what we mean by “beginning.” We need some agreement about those two categories before we can investigate, as the editors of this volume invited us contributors to do, “the procedures, structures, and institutions that encouraged the development of distinct literatures.” As you will see, I take emic, local, or what I call “traditionist,” views of both categories, “literature” and “beginning,” as seriously as I take “historicist” ones: that is, what people in the tradition believed to have happened, and what we think really happened.

I want to walk you through some elementary aspects of these two categories in precolonial India. With some new clarity, I hope, in our minds about literature and beginnings, I will next address the literary-cultural mechanisms of inauguration, and what I see as the typical social-political context where this inauguration found its ground. Since I have been tasked with accounting for all India (or South Asia; I use the terms synonymously), and

since the beginnings of literature in India offer a breathtaking spectacle of literary proliferation without parallel outside western Europe, I will have to generalize shamelessly, though I temper my generalizations by offering detail in several cases that have been the subject of recent scholarly studies. Please remember that mine is only one story among several possible others.

Once this overall picture of vernacular beginnings is sketched, I will turn to the case that lies at the foundation of them all and that nonetheless is the most obscure: how Sanskrit literature itself may be thought to begin. In saying “foundation of them all” I must be clear about the fact that I am making one important omission here, the case of Persian and Arabic. These two literary languages were used for more than a millennium in South Asia, and they also interacted in various ways with Indian vernaculars. But to include them would risk making an already complex story chaotic, and testing my already overstretched abilities.

Literature

I readily acknowledge how usefully Western theory has muddied the question “What is literature?” As others have said and as I myself have often reiterated, the term “literature” needs to be understood as a functional rather than an ontological category. In this it is rather like the category “weed,” as Terry Eagleton once put it: for one person a pest, for another a flower, for yet a third, dinner. Any discourse can be read as literature—say, the *Astronomica*, to take an example in honor of our senior editor—or “unread” as literature—the *Aeneid*, for example, as a book of predictions. Precisely as in the case of Manilius and Vergil, in India an astronomical text like the *Brhatsaṃhitā* could be read as poetry, and poetry, such as *Rāmāyaṇa*, could be used in a quasi-bibliomantic, or at least

magical, fashion (as for example in a *pārāyaṇa*, or daily reading/recitation, of the *Sundarkāṇḍa*, the fifth book of the *Vālmīki Rāmāyaṇa*).

That the works of the two authors in question, Varahamihira (sixth century CE) and Valmiki (second century BCE?), did cross genres and could lend themselves to literary reading and unreading, suggests strongly that, indeed, function rather than ontology is the key diagnostic of “literature.” It is not what the text is, as such—no text, and nothing, is anything *as such*—that makes it literature, but what people do with it: whether—as I will suggest in moment—they seek the rewards of information or those of imagination. Yet, while that may be largely true, readers in India believed, or were encouraged to believe, that there is in fact a clear boundary to be crossed (such that the migration across it, as just described, did not always go uncontested). And at that boundary we can perceive that the functionalist prejudice of Western theory requires supplementation by traditionist knowledge. Such knowledge in the Indian case shows that contemporary arguments against essentializing literature can themselves be unhistorical essentializations. In India, this knowledge is anything but vague. Indeed, we can point to a very carefully theorized conception of the difference between forms of discourse.

There are several typologies dividing up the realm of “discourse,” in Sanskrit *vāṇmaya*, “all that is made of language.” One typology separates *vāṇmaya* into two large classes, *śāstra* and *kāvya*, or works of systematic thought, and literature. For our purposes here the two types of discourse may be more generally distinguished, as I have elsewhere tried to distinguish them, as, on the one hand, the “documentary,” or informational, constative, contentual, and, on the other, the “workly,” or imaginative, performative, expressive (terms, or something like them, first introduced by the intellectual historian Dominick

LaCapra, borrowing in turn from Heidegger). A second typology, which I'll adduce in a moment, supports this distinction. Although other traditions may have drawn a similar contrast, I doubt any was as fully conceptualized as in India: there, the *differentia specifica* of the discourse species called *kāvya* within the genus of "what-is-made-of-language" obsessed thinkers for almost two millennia, in their quest to discover what they called the *ātman*, the essence or soul, of *kāvya*.

I will later return to the historical moment of the constitution of *kāvya* in practice in the early centuries of the common era. What I want to stress now is that *kāvya* was constituted and conceptualized for three languages and three only: Sanskrit and two others, called Prakrit and Apabhramsha, that may best be thought of as dialects of Sanskrit, to be used for certain registers, especially the demotic, rustic, and feminine, and genres, such as the pastoral (a crude generalization requiring the nuance of Andrew Ollett's recent work). Note, in passing, that none of these three names is an ethnonym, like "French" or "English," but rather a linguistic descriptor, "perfected," "natural," and "degraded," respectively (and very approximately). More important, Sanskrit along with its two additional literary registers were what we might class as "cosmopolitan" both in their linguistic aspect (where they were strictly regulated in grammar and lexicon) and in the language ideology explicitly argued out by the users of the languages. That is, the three cosmopolitan languages were believed to exist in what could be called a *panchronic* and *panchoric* flatland, where any variation across time and space was denied—and any absence, too: Sanskrit and its two associated dialect-like codes were believed to travel everywhere and to be everywhere the same. In these features they differed radically from those languages, regional or vernacular, that, thanks to the powers that Sanskrit itself conferred, were eventually to become

literary and to supplement or even supplant Sanskrit. All these languages were—and all knew themselves to be—restricted in both space and time: that is, they were *epichoric* and *epichronic* (if, in the latter case, we are prepared to coin yet another new term).

This replacement happened through a process of *vernacularization*, which like any process, presupposes a commencement. Here matters get a little complicated, and we need to reflect on how things may in general be thought to begin before we get to vernacular beginnings in particular.

Beginnings

There is a range of conceptual, cognitive, and ideological problems hovering around the idea of beginnings, for which, so far as I can see, we possess no good comprehensive account, as least for the history of culture. Many people, like Michel Foucault, do not like beginnings. You will recall how Foucault (prompted by Nietzsche's shifting use of the terms *Herkunft* and *Ursprung*) came to stress the opposition between his favored historical method of genealogy and the despised "search for 'origins.'" The latter, he told us, is "an attempt to capture the exact essence of things, their purest possibilities," whereas genealogy knows that things have no timeless essences, no essential secret—other than "the secret that they have no essence," that "their essence was fabricated in a piecemeal fashion." When we move from Foucault's vast world of moral philosophy to our small world of literary history, scholars similarly tell us that "discovering the origin of the sonnet," to take that one tiny case explored in Karla Mallette's wonderful book on the history of Sicilian literature, "is a grail that has become less compelling" because "origin studies themselves have come to seem less important" (2005, 77). This despite the fact that thirteenth-

century Sicilian literary culture, about which this observation is made, is celebrated for the poets' "keen awareness of the literary history that preceded them" and their "willingness to experiment with received traditions." But how are we even to identify experiment if we are indifferent to knowing, or ready even to deny the possibility of knowing, "origins," that is, how newness enters the literary world? The essence of the sonnet was no doubt "fabricated in a piecemeal fashion," but when Giacomo da Lentini finished his fabrication a poetic form achieved a kind of existence it did not have before. And it made history—or, more important, successive generations of Tuscan poets acted as if it did. If traditionism affirms what historicism denies, that surely counts for something, for it tells us what those historical agents thought and did.

It should be clear that things like sonnets with their "exact essences" do originate and make history, in some hard historicist sense, and we can in principle capture that origin and chart its history of effects. At the same time, actors in a tradition will, in some soft traditionist sense, have various ideas and practices, often discrepant vis-à-vis our hard history, about how things originate and make history, and their ideas must be an equal part of our study of beginnings as well as of "literature," for those ideas and practices have their own effects. I turn now to the process of origins that I will call *vernacularization*.

Vernacularization and Some Other Long Words

To understand the cultural processes of vernacularization I have to introduce two closely linked ideas via terms I find rebarbative but for which I find no suitable alternatives: *literization* and *literarization*. The former is just a translation of the German *Verschriftlichung* and refers to the fact and process of inscribing what, to the degree that we can reconstruct it, had previously been entirely oral.

The latter refers to the procedures for turning a “documentary” language into “workly” one: into the expressive, the imaginative, or—in India—into kāvya.

My purpose in introducing these two terms is to provide some analytical language for the beginning of literature in general. They also enable us to chart what for me is one of the most instructive facts of the beginnings of South Asian literature, and what I actually first deployed those two terms to account for: namely, the time lag between the initial inscription of a language, its literization, and its attaining embodiment in kāvya, its literarization. In other words, these two processes are by no means coterminous, and while the former is the necessary condition of the latter, it is not a sufficient condition: Not only can a language exist without literization, but literization does not invariably lead to literarization.

But why is literization essential to the question of literary beginning in any case? One could certainly argue that the category of kāvya itself may have displaced earlier, alternative, forms of literary culture in any given vernacular world. Fair enough, but for one thing, none of those forms is anywhere extant. Consider the case of Kannada, the language spoken today in the modern Indian state of Karnataka.

Those genres mentioned in the first surviving Kannada text, the *Kavirājamārga* (*The Way of the Poet King*), a sort of *de Vulgari Eloquentia* for India, have vanished without trace (I will address in due course the case of Tamil). Second, such an argument would only be substituting one type of beginning for another, and, what is more important, one that the tradition, by its *choice* not to preserve, did not consecrate as a beginning. The same holds for the postulation of “oral literature.” However much and however reasonably we philologists may be inclined to find the expressive in the oral texts of South Asia, to which we now have broad access thanks to the work of several

generations of anthropologists and folklorists, traditional theorists of *kāvya* in India never accorded them the status of literature; they never even mentioned them except under the rubric of “song” (*gīti*, *gāna*, etc.), which itself was never considered *kāvya*. It was—and let me stress this point—the invention and spread of writing in the last centuries BCE that drew a new boundary between the purely oral and *kāvya*. You might say, therefore (as I have in fact already said in *Language of the Gods*), that “writing was never essential to Indian literature—until literature became *literature*” (2006, 4) that is, *kāvya*.

Two points need to be stressed about these processes. First, let me repeat that the attainment of inscription was not inevitable for any given language. Second, if inscription was a necessary condition for literature it was not a sufficient condition. Not all languages attained written form, and not all written languages immediately and ipso facto became literary languages. Nothing about either literization and literarization is natural. Both were slow and uneven developments that occurred under particular and, generally speaking, specifiable conditions, where social-political factors, including imitation and competition among rival polities, were crucial.

It may be illogical to speak of “languages” in the case of codes that never achieved literization, insofar as that process (and even more so literarization) is what enables a language to be known, named, and distinguished from others—to be conceptually constituted as *a language*—in the first place. But we know of numerous cases of what I have to still call languages (or “languages”) in South Asia that never found written representation until the colonial or modern era: Kodagu, Konkani, and Tulu are examples in the south, and Dogri in the north; even Panjabi in the northwest was a late (eighteenth-century) participant in the two processes. We also know that the inaugural moment of inscription could be an object of a highly self-conscious

awareness that something new and unprecedented was taking place. The author of one of the earliest works, if not the earliest work, of Old Hindi (depending on how one defines “Old Hindi,” a question we return to momentarily) was a Sufi romance: the *Story of Chanda* (*Candāyan*), composed in the late fourteenth century by a Muslim, Maulana Daud. The author tells us how (according to Allison Busch) he adapted a love story current in his milieu (he speaks of it as *gāi*, or “sung”), and formalized it into a literary work (2011, 208–9). He did this in part, as again he explicitly reports, by learning to write in “Turki” script under his teacher’s tutelage and, having done so, by recording in that same script what he composed. It is all as if this had never been done before for Hindi—as, so far as we can tell, it had likely not.

Why some “languages” were chosen for literization and not others is a question I cannot answer with much confidence, or why and under precisely what circumstances those chosen were first literized. What we can establish securely, however, is the temporal discontinuity—or time lag as I called it earlier—between that process and literarization. The enormous epigraphical record of premodern South Asia allows us to chart this discontinuity with some precision, and it is often vast. Take again the case of Kannada. Our earliest lithic inscriptions date to the early fifth century CE, and from that point on until the end of the ninth century all Kannada writing is documentary: deeds, donations, proclamations, and the like. There is no evidence whatever for literary production until the last quarter of the ninth century, when *kāvya* and its philological appurtenances (works on rhetoric, prosody, lexicography) began to appear and be preserved at royal courts. The Kannada case is paradigmatic, and it has a lot—though not everything—to tell us about the beginning of literature in India. The two most important things it tells us

about are, first, the processes of *culture* at work in this beginning, and, second, the processes of *power*.

Vernacular literatures in India often began via a cultural process I've called *superposition*. To write vernacular literature was to transpose to a given regional world—indeed, a world that thereby became meaningfully “regional” in the first place—the cosmopolitan style and aesthetic of Sanskrit (and, to a lesser extent, Prakrit and Apabhramsha), in both form and content. Here is not the place for detail on these matters (which are fully set forth in my *Language of the Gods*), but briefly, in everything from lexicon to figures of speech to the narratives themselves—often episodes from the Sanskrit epics or even appropriations in their entirety—the vernaculars became literary by being local habitations of translocal literariness. This was never translation, which however variously we might define that term was relatively rare in India before the coming of Islamicate cultures (there is no word for it in South Asian languages until the modern period), but something at once more autonomous and fully recognizable as imitation.

The process of *power* at work in all this pertains to the consolidation of the regional kingdoms that arose with the waning of the great imperial power formations (Maurya, Kushana, Gupta) after the middle of the first millennium. In precisely the same way as Sanskrit had been the vehicle for the political aesthetic of the empire form, so regional language became the vehicle for the political aesthetic of what we might call *faute de mieux*, the vernacular polity form. Notionally at least empire is, if not exactly like Augustine's definition of God—an entity whose circumference is everywhere and center nowhere—defined precisely by its unboundedness. And the cultural vehicle of that political unboundedness had to be itself without boundaries, a language that could travel everywhere: languages like Chinese, Latin, Persian ... and Sanskrit. But

the postimperial form has, or rather creates, boundaries, and its cultural vehicle has to be a language that does not travel far: Korean and Vietnamese, for example; or (precolonial) French and Italian, or Georgian and Uzbek ... and Kannada, Telugu, Marathi, and the rest of the regional languages of the subcontinent.

Into Some Vernacular Weeds

While it is probably obvious, I should state clearly that not all literary life in premodern South Asia can be fully accommodated by the model I have just sketched, and I want briefly to notice here some of the modifications that might be made.

The most important concerns what I have thought of as a *secondary* vernacular revolution. Here, the high register of the “cosmopolitan vernacular” that characterizes the beginnings of so much regional literature was contested, or rather rejected, by insurgent religious groups beginning from about the twelfth century on, who contested the dominance of the Sanskrit cultural and social order (the Sufi role in the vernacularization process, already noted in the case of the *Candāyan*, is another important strand). Why such groups would reject Sanskrit has to do with a crucial aspect of its sociolinguistics that has so far gone unmentioned: its role in the ideological reproduction of unequal power, in particular the power of caste and untouchability. Caste and Sanskrit are coextensive: there is no caste without Sanskrit, and there is no Sanskrit without caste, and this was the case from the very commencement of caste consciousness in the late Vedic period. It is unquestionably true that earlier groups had fundamentally contested social inequality and, accordingly, explicitly rejected Sanskrit in favor of other languages as the vehicle for their contestation. Preeminent among these were the Buddhists, who favored local idioms such as Gandhari (in

today's northwest Pakistan), or fashioned an alternative transregional *Schriftsprach* in the form of Pali. But remarkably, some Buddhists, the Sarvastivadin lineage in particular, would eventually accept that language for their scripture (around the beginning of the Common Era). It is also true that lower caste communities, even untouchables, could and did contribute to Sanskrit literature. Yet, it is also unquestionable, if more difficult to explain, that over the course of the second millennium the social boundaries of Sanskrit began to narrow, and access to the language became more restricted. When Kabir, a celebrated Hindi poet of the fifteenth century, contrasted "the stagnant well water of Sanskrit" with "the fresh running currents of the vernacular," he was contrasting a language that was the voice of oppression with a language that was, or could be, the voice of liberation.

Kabir was an early representative of bhakti, or "devotional," movements, as they are called (for which John Stratton Hawley recently provided a historical overview), which introduced a far more demotic, uncourtly, or even anticourtly, element, in both form and content, into the literary bloodstream. Thus, moraic (or other types of "folk") meters, regional lexemes, and highly localized forms of religious affiliation replaced the quantitative versification, derivative vocabulary, and pan-Indic forms of divinity. Also rejected were the quasi-imperial kingly interests of the earlier literature in favor of the politics of the personal, if I may put it that way. In some places, this movement may not have been "secondary," but rather the only revolution there was: the so-called vernacular polity may not have been the necessary and sufficient condition. This devotional movement was long viewed as the dominant driver of vernacularization, in fact, the only driver. As a hypothesis of cultural change, religious radicalism clearly derived something of its plausibility from its parallels with the vernacular Bible movement of the Reformation; indeed, it

was founded on one of those “Protestant presuppositions” that have long shaped Indian historiography. But for some regions parts of the hypothesis may still have purchase.

Christian Novetzke has recently argued that this scenario basically explains the case of Marathi, the language of the modern state of Maharashtra in western India, which I had earlier sought to understand according to my standard, culture-power model. In the Marathi area the principal dynasty in the early centuries of vernacularization was actually a Kannada-speaking one, and political inscription in Marathi was accordingly slow to emerge; even once it did, Marathi remained rare (something easy to perceive in the epigraphical record, but harder to explain). For Novetzke, the court had no direct role to play in the production of literary work in Marathi. Indirectly, however, it created around it and sustained the Brahmanical ecumene that then fed the key creators or producers of the first two major works in Marathi, which pretty clearly emerged in religious rather than political contexts.

In the same way I myself have had doubts about the application of my general model to medieval Bengal. There too, as in Maharashtra, the record of courtly patronage for early Bangla literature is much harder to reconstruct, whether because the data are just too thin or because such patronage was less prominent in a political landscape where Islamic sultanates replaced Hindu little kingdoms.

Aside from the sometimes ambiguous role of the court, two other factors can be identified to complicate my model. One concerns space, the other time. Hindi offers a messier spatial case of vernacularization than any other in South Asia, and Tamil an apparently more disruptive temporal one.

What we today call Hindi offers one of the more complicated puzzles in the history of Indian literary beginnings. Allison Busch, among the few scholars to

address this matter directly and authoritatively, begins her study by making the important observation that arguments can readily be offered for multiple beginnings, even if the unit of study, “Hindi,” had not itself been multiple and did not comprise a wide range of regional and social (caste) dialects (she lists sixteen varieties off the top of her head), stretching across much of north India, that can reasonably be included in the category. One could easily argue that it was the narrative of the nation in twentieth-century India that synthesized this motley congeries of textual cultures into a homogeneous “Hindi” literary tradition, overlooking or suppressing difference (a typical sleight-of-hand of cultural-nationalist discourse). But if we look comprehensively at this congeries, we can still draw some important and—if measured by India’s current nationalist ideology equating Hindi and Hindu—explosive conclusions. In one of these dialects, namely Avadhi (the language of Avadh, or what is today eastern Uttar Pradesh), the first Hindi work, the *Candāyan*, already referred to, was composed by a Muslim, Maulana Daud. Daud represents precisely the kind of interstitial figure shuttling across linguistic and cultural divides whom we can find elsewhere in this book, and who will reappear, in my discussion below, in the figure of the Indo-Scythians located at the center of the origins of Sanskrit *kāvya*. That is to say, nontraditional agents who appropriated the hieratic language of Sanskrit for political-aesthetic purposes. For Daud’s work it is also worth emphasizing Busch’s observation that neither Persian nor Sanskrit exclusively provided the superposed model; something else is going on, what she suggestively terms multipolar superposition: several traditions with their particular lexicons, metrics, figures, and themes fed into its creation.

A “major resetting of the dial” of literary culture elevated another dialect, Brajbhasha, into a literary language at the end of the sixteenth century, again, within

the power sphere of the Mughals, the Muslim imperial dynasty, and their Rajput (Hindu) vassals. Among the most notable of these Brajbhasha poets, Keshavdas, is celebrated as the *ādi-kavi*, or “primordial poet” in the Braj tradition itself, a kind of vernacular Valmiki, who, we shall see, was thus consecrated in the Sanskrit tradition. One last point: in the case of both Avadhi and Brajbhasha literary cultures, Busch points to the fact that the dividing line between the political and religious is not so easily drawn: works participate in both spheres almost by design, such that (in my terms) primary and secondary vernacularization seem to be copresent.

A last case to consider, one potentially disruptive of my model from a temporal perspective, is presented by Tamil, a language of the far southeast of the subcontinent. Its earliest literature is referred to as the *cankam* (or *sangam*) corpus (the corpus of the “Community,” the literary academy associated with early, if not prehistorical, royal courts), which has been the object of extraordinarily divergent dating since rediscovered in the late nineteenth century. Even the concept of rediscovery is up for debate, since the works now are thought not to have totally vanished from literary memory. Part of the puzzle of the historical shape of early Tamil literature is the fact—or it seems to me a fact—that Tamil poets and thinkers themselves seem to have been preoccupied with this historical shape, and invented various archaic origin myths: an academy of poets in an ancient period whose works were washed away by floods, which also took other texts at other times, only to be rediscovered later in this temple or that. In short, Tamil offers a literary culture obsessed—from long before modernity and in ways that seem to me unprecedented—with the problem of literary history, with antiquity, primordially, and, in fact, beginnings.

On this very contested terrain, this much can be said, I think, with confidence: A very early date for a *written* body

of Tamil “literature” *as defined by Indians*—in the first or second century CE, as some scholars propose—would be in massive conflict with the securely dated beginnings more than half a millennium later for the adjacent literary cultures of Kannada and Telugu, with which Tamil was closely associated (a point invariably ignored in discussions of dating). A circa eighth-century date—if only for the literization and codification of an earlier oral corpus, but we cannot know this—is also suggested by the well-documented and vigorous literary patronage of the period’s vernacular polity known as the Pandya. If this setting is the true one, the culture-power hypothesis I have earlier presented would largely be sustained in Tamil country, though the jury may still be out as to final dating (David Shulman offers a balanced overview; Eva Wilden supplies much food for thought to nuance some of the ideas presented here, whereas Hermann Tieken is a devil’s advocate whose views are not easy to dismiss out of court). As for the role of superposition, it is certainly more muted in the Tamil world, which possesses an independent system of versification, a unique aesthetic system, and other highly localized formal features, but it is present nonetheless and grows increasingly prominent in the later medieval period, especially with the rise of a commentarial, or more generally philological, culture around the thirteenth century. Consider that the most ancient book of Tamil literary-and-grammatical theory is entitled *Tolkappiyam*, “Old kāvya.”

Sanskrit Beginnings, Finally

All this brings us, by a commodious vicus of recirculation, back to Sanskrit. What can I say about how, when, and why Sanskrit literature began? Here too, of course, even more than everywhere else, it all depends on what we mean by “literature.” Or rather, on what Indians meant by literature.

One thing Indians most decidedly did not mean by literature, once the word for literature, *kāvya*, was in common use, was what is called Veda, which, with its “ancillary knowledge forms,” the *veda-aṅgas* (grammar, prosody, phonetics, and so on) constituted *the whole space of discourse in Sanskrit* before the invention of *kāvya*.

“Veda” is a cover term used by Indians for a large corpus of very heterogeneous material, only one subset of which concerns us in a discussion of literature. This is the category of *mantra*, those thought (*man-*) instruments (*-tra*) said to call to mind the deities, substances, and the like to be used by participants in the rituals for which the Vedas were used, and in so doing convey mythic or other imaginative content. The remaining materials were categorized by the custodians of the Vedas, the Mimamsakas, or exegetes, into three genres: *commandments*, which are used to prompt the performance of ritual actions; *names* of sacrifices; and “discourses on things,” *arthavādas*, accounts of the powers of the sacrifice, and the like. All three are documentary, devoid of any “workly” aspect.

Mantras, however, do have such an aspect. In fact, they are often referred to in the Veda itself and afterward as *sūkta*, “well-spoken,” a term often applied directly (or in one of its congeners, such *subhāṣita*, “well-turned”) to *kāvya* itself. Not only that, the persons who composed these *sūktas* were often called *kavi* in the Vedic corpus and by the exegetes (including the greatest among them, the seventh-century thinker named Kumarila) well into the medieval period. From *kavi*, of course, derives *kāvya*, the “work of the *kavi*,” a term not entirely unknown to the Veda but in common currency only very much after the Vedic period. And these mantras are old indeed: the earliest collections (*saṃhitā*) can pretty securely be dated to the last centuries of the second millennium BCE. They were all oral in composition and were transmitted orally over centuries—

writing was not to appear in South Asia for another millennium—by a remarkable memory culture that largely arrested textual change, until they were committed to writing first in the early centuries of the *second* millennium *CE*—two thousand years after their composition.

While we philologists and other modern scholars may be inclined to think of this Vedic material as literature (Stephanie Jamison has made strong arguments in this direction), no one in India ever did. Consider the second traditional typology of “things made of language” that I alluded to earlier. This radically differentiates the Veda from the literary: the Veda (i.e., the mantras) were held to be “phonocentric,” concerned with sound; śāstra (history, science, scholarship, etc.) “logocentric,” concerned with meaning; literature, and literature alone, was said to combine both phonocentric and logocentric features. In fact, the belief that Vedic mantras are purely phonocentric, devoid of meaning, was a very ancient one: their ritual efficacy was held to derive entirely from their enunciation, not from their semantic capacity. In addition, nowhere in the post-Vedic age is a Vedic text ever adduced as an example in any discussion of *kāvya*; nor is the Veda ever represented in literary anthologies. It was viewed as a radically different, *nonhuman*, form of language. And it is not only typologies and the pragmatics of literary culture that exclude the Veda; Indian thinkers were explicit in their assessment: “The use of the word ‘poet’ [*kavi*] in the Veda,” explained the tenth-century CE scholar Bhatta Tota, “refers to a seer’s true insight, but its meaning in everyday life refers to both insight and a gift for description. Valmiki, the primordial sage, however insightful he may have been, did not become a *poet* until he mastered description” (Pollock 2016, 182).

There are two important takeaways here for our understanding of the beginning of Sanskrit literature. The first has to do with the “primordial sage” mentioned here,

namely, Valmiki. For all Indian theorists for almost two millennia, Valmiki was the *ādi-kavi*, the “first poet.” They had no doubt whatsoever that Sanskrit poetry began (and by the process of superposition mentioned earlier, most vernacular literatures also came to posit a first poet for their own literary cultures). The second takeaway has to do with what it was about Valmiki’s work, the *Rāmāyaṇa*, that qualified it for its position of primordality. For Bhavabhuti, a celebrated eighth-century playwright, it was Valmiki’s use of metrical Sanskrit (“the teacher who was the first to use metrical forms”) (Pollock 2007, 231) Since formally the *Rāmāyaṇa* does employ many of the same meters as are found in the Veda, the dramatist clearly did not think of the Veda as “metrical” in any comparable sense. What Valmiki invented when he invented *kāvya* was *versified description*, as Tota puts it—a good definition of literature’s phono-logocentric character. And this was, above all, description of *laukika*, “this-worldly,” experience—experience of the divine sometimes, to be sure, but human experience nonetheless. In the view of classical Indian thinkers, no text before Valmiki’s recorded human experience in metrical language. No text was *literature*.

Leaving the traditionists, what can we say about the historical circumstances for what Indians long acknowledged to have been the beginning of a new form of Sanskrit culture they called *kāvya*? Here things get speculative and dating difficult, but the position I have taken for some time (and which has largely been adopted in the most recent overview, that of Yigal Bronner and his colleagues) is as follows. Written forms of Sanskrit appear for the first time in epigraphs a little before the beginning of the common era. The writing system in use, known as Brahmi (which would eventually be adapted for all South Asian scripts), was invented in India in the middle of the third century BCE in the chancery of the Mauryan emperor Ashoka, for the publication of his edicts. (In my view, this

presents another element of imperial imitation beginning with the ancient Persians and descending to the Romans in the west and even to the Angkor kings in the east.) All that early inscriptional material is purely documentary. Workly forms appear only somewhat later, many of them associated with ruling lineages newly immigrant from western Asia, especially Indo-Scythian groups. Our first full-scale expressive text, in Kunstprosa, was produced from within the court of a military governor from one of these groups in 150 CE. This entire epigraphic record had long been believed—given the common prejudice to deny strong beginnings marked by full-formed works—to constitute a *terminus ante quem*: Sanskrit literature must, it was thought, have long preceded these well-formed epigraphs. I find no clear evidence whatever to support such a hypothesis. I therefore interpret the Indo-Scythian and related records as constituting a *terminus post quem*, marking the first experiments in an unprecedented, *public* and so to speak *secular*, use of Sanskrit, the language of the gods, hitherto an exclusively ritual or quasi-ritual language.

One can even argue that this was an experiment that in a real sense was a desecration, which explains why it caught on slowly and why some early examples of the experiment were not in Sanskrit itself but in its less hieratic code, Prakrit. It was obviously those situated outside the old Sanskrit culture who recognized the symbolic value of the language for a new aestheticization of imperial power, of the sort that would be recreated, from Afghanistan to Java, by ruling dynasties (Kushanas, Guptas, and so on) in the coming millennium and transferred thereafter to the regional polity in the vernacular millennium.

Although not associated with these new ruling lineages but participating instead in the new political theology of the emperor Ashoka two centuries or so earlier, the *Vālmīki Rāmāyaṇa* shows evidence of the same historic caesura. It

is situated on the very boundary of these new beginnings, composed orally in the last century or so before the start of the Common Era but committed to writing soon thereafter, at the dawn of the new era of literacy. The very idea of commencement is celebrated, highly self-consciously, in the first book of the poem itself, where we find a reflexive representation of orality—and the transformation of an earlier song-like tradition precisely as in the case of Daud’s *Candāyan*—that was possible only in a world aware of both literization and literarization.

I leave you with a brisk summary, and a question I have not yet raised and which I think may be the most important for us contributors to this book.

First, both beginnings and “literature,” the latter especially, need to be understood at once in a historicist and a “traditionist” sense, and these do not always coincide. Second, in India, the history of literature is a history of cosmopolitan and vernacular literary cultures. The latter inaugurate literature, in the traditionist sense of “literature,” on the basis of paradigms established by the former (*superposition*) by a discontinuous process of literization and literarization, in which in many cases so-called vernacular polities were the driving force in progressing from the one, inscription, to the other, literature. Cosmopolitan literary culture too, again in the traditionist sense, had a beginning (here history and tradition converge, around the figure of Valmiki), where the emergent empire form seemed to grasp the political-cultural possibilities of a secularization of a sacred language, one that seemed to move effortlessly across space and time, for a new aesthetics of imperial power.

My as yet unasked question is what it means to think about the Indian case in a global perspective. What sort of knowledge do we want the comparison of beginnings to

produce? Comparative projects typically, if surprisingly, do not thematize comparison itself; what they typically do is abdicate their responsibility to compare, and leave synthesis to the hapless reader. But how do we in fact thematize comparison here in the world of literary studies? There are of course many things we can do: validate a hypothesis over N cases; develop a causal account of big structures and processes; identify the relationship between social or political forms and literary forms; simply (and perhaps not so simply) enrich our individual cases by producing more granular appreciations of their distinctiveness through juxtaposition to others, and so on. This is not a question to be solved before the data are in, of course, but once they are, we must be prepared to try.

Further Reading

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