Marco Franceschini, Chiara Livio, Lidia Wojtczak (eds)

BHŪTĀRTHAKATHANE . . . SARASVATĪ

Reading Poetry as a History Book

Studies on the History of Śaivism IV

UniorPress

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Preface

Marco Franceschini, Chiara Livio, Lidia Wojtczak*

ślāghyaḥ sa eva guṇavān rāgadveṣabahiṣkṛtā |
bhūtārthakathane yasya stheyasyeva sarasvatī ||
Kalhaṇa, *Rājataraṅgiṇī* 1.7

Worthy of praise is that noble-minded man alone
Whose speech, like that of a judge,
Remains free from passion or hatred
In the telling of things past.

The Sanskrit title of this volume,[1] *Bhūtārthakathane . . . Sarasvatī*, is drawn from a verse of Kalhaṇa's *Rājataraṅgiṇī*, the twelfth-century chronicle of the kings of Kashmir, widely regarded as the Sanskrit historical work *par excellence*. In this verse, Kalhaṇa presents his work as a poet-historian, likening his scholarly speech to that of a judge: impartial and objective in recounting the past.

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This claim is part of a longer lecture (*Rājataraṅgiṇī* 1.3–24)[2] in which Kalhaṇa argues for a more rigorous approach to history-writing. His goal is clear: to restore order and certainty and to correct all the mistakes of earlier historical narrations. Kalhaṇa does not hesitate to criticise those who failed in their duty to history, even the great Kashmiri polymath Kṣemendra is not spared from his scorn. For Kalhaṇa, the key to accurate history lies in connecting the often fragmentary and erroneous information given by previous chronicles through the usage of primary sources—manuscripts, royal grants, and inscriptions. He alone would be the one to pin down the strands of the fabric of history, so annoyingly flapping in the wind.

But what can we consider 'history' when we speak about poetry (*kāvya*)? This question was the central theme of an International Symposium held in Bologna in December 2022. The event, which shares its title with this volume, brought together a group of scholars engaged in the study of South Asian *kāvya* traditions. The lively discussions and exchanges that unfolded there not only sparked new insights but also helped shape many of the contributions and interpretative approaches applied in this volume.

A key concern that emerged during the preparation of the Bologna Symposium, as is also reflected throughout the contributions to this collection, is the tension between two distinct but overlapping tendencies: the desire to extract 'hard' *historical facts* from poetic texts, and the need to attend to the *history of poetry* itself—its forms, conventions, and evolving self-understanding.

The first tendency, rooted in a positivist orientation, is not without value and treats poetry as a source of verifiable data, privileging chronology, external references, and seemingly less poetic passages to study specific people, events, and contexts related to the poet's surroundings. We see poets citing their patrons, describing their land, discussing the production of *kāvya* itself. This is a treasure trove for all the information we might want to preserve and detect as 'history.' Yet, isolating historical reality from literary embellishment is not always productive when applied to poetry. If we focus only on lexical occurrences of the past and their external corroboration, we might miss the interpretive and aesthetic richness through which many Sanskrit poets engaged with history. Kalhaṇa's self-conscious commitment to factual accuracy remains exceptional, his work aims to be decidedly historical and he is what we can now call a historian. In most other cases, however, the historical traces preserved in *kāvya are not the works' main focus.* Yet,

[2] Stein, Marc Aurel, ed. (1892) 1988. *Kalhaṇa's Rājataraṅgiṇī. Chronicles of the Kings of Kashmir*. Volume 3. Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass.

even when we are left without explicitly mentioned historical facts or geographical locations, the descriptive passages that conventionally occupy most *kāvya* works can still help define history. Texts can aim for a broader, often universal, aesthetic or moral resonance, yet invite recognition from contemporary audiences through shared cultural referents; specific, described landscapes or emotional tones serve to ground the text in lived experience while simultaneously gesturing to timeless truths.

One approach to reading poetry as a history book involves, then, zooming in on the small details to detect general tendencies and cultural practices within a poetic work that may indirectly speak to the author's historical positioning and local affiliations. For instance, the subordination of one deity to another in a literary work that is not religious in scope can say a lot about the poet's religious milieu. The prominence of a particular sacred geography, in which a lesser-known site is described more in depth than other better-known pilgrimage centres, can similarly suggest localised devotional priorities. Even small iconographic details, such as the attributes of certain deities, can resonate with regionally specific artistic and archaeological traditions. This is especially evident when regional inflections subtly reshape otherwise pan-Indian poetic conventions. For instance, a region-specific evolution of genres can provide literary and historical traces of local courtly and cultural settings. In other cases, poetry may reflect historical experience by projecting an idealised past onto politically fragmented presents. Romanticised depictions of unity and wealth can sometimes mask the precarity of the poet's reality, marked by unstable courtly life or dynastic changes. All these elements, which rarely speak in isolation, can help reconstruct both cultural and literary history if taken as cumulative evidence.

A second approach is that of considering that poets not only embedded history within their works but also actively participated in shaping the literary history of poetry. When poets adapt or push against established aesthetic norms, they show both their creativity and how their work was shaped by the taste and knowledge of their community of listeners. For instance, formal and conventional practices in poetry—such as engaging with previous *kāvya* works through literary borrowing or poetic allusion, which are often far from being mere acts of homage or incidental gestures—can signal not only a poet's means of entering into dialogue with past masters while reasserting their voice and position, but also a deliberate strategy of historical engagement. These intertextual dialogues are essential for understanding how poets envisioned their place within a broader literary landscape. In this sense, the history of poetry is not just found in what poets explicitly say about the past, but also in how they frame their poetic identity as inheritors, transmitters, and creators of tradition.

With this in mind, the authors in this volume shape the concept of history through the lens of their scholarly interests, starting from analysing primary sources in Sanskrit and Tamil, to discussing broader themes such as history in literature, literary history, and imagined and real spaces in *kāvya*.

Csaba Dezső explores the earliest Sanskrit Buddhist *kāvya*s—Kumāralāta's *Kalpanāmaṇḍitikā Dṛṣṭāntapaṅkti* (third century CE), Āryaśūra's *Jātakamālā* (first half of the fourth century CE), and Haribhaṭṭa's *Jātakamālā* (around 400 CE) in 'Referentiality and historicity in early Buddhist narrative *kāvya*.' After giving an exhaustive background for each text, Dezső considers questions of referentiality and localization. Kumāralāta's work has concrete ties to a lived reality, with names of kings such as Aśoka, Kaṇiṣka, and Huviṣka, as well as many Greater Gandhāran toponyms mentioned. The two *Jātakamālā*s, on the other hand, show a tendency towards universality and set their stories 'in an unspecified past, often at unnamed locations and with the nameless Bodhisattva as the protagonist.' Dezső proposes to consider this development through a reflection on how these texts may have been used. Taking clues from the texts themselves, as well as from a recently reconstructed Preacher's Manual (**Saddharmaparikathā*), he demonstrates how the Jātakamālā collections were part of the 'preacher's toolkit' and were 'used in sermons to illustrate the Buddha's teachings.' In Dezső's chapter, we see *kāvya* 'put in the service of homiletics,' deeply engaged in the very real missions of the Buddhist preachers.

Whitney Cox, in his chapter 'Liquid swords: History through allusion in Bilhaṇa's *Vikramāṅkadevacarita*,' encourages the reader to consider patron-centered *kāvya* as a hermeneutical key for the understanding of the complex relationships of writers, patrons, and their audience. Cox urges us to consider these texts not only as historical literature but also to see them within the history of literature and to consider that works of literature are themselves 'invested in making history.' Using a theoretical framework of poetic allusion as his starting point, Cox takes his readers on an excursion following the development of the literary trope of *dhārājala*, 'water on the edge of a sword's blade.' He proves that a close and sensitive reading of a multivalent literary allusion appearing in *kāvya* spanning the four or so centuries between the flourishing of Bāṇa (fl. ca. 625–650) and Bilhaṇa (late eleventh century CE) can tell us much about the historical realities contextual to the works, about the authors and their milieu, about the court and its anxieties, and the personal stories of the poets themselves.

Tancredi Padova is also interested in the idea of poetic allusion as a historical strategy, and elaborates it in his chapter 'Poeticising history, historicising poetry. On literary borrowing in late medieval historical-biographical

Sanskrit *kāvya*.' The chapter, which focuses on the *Madhurāvijaya* by Gaṅgādevī, a poetess of fourteenth-century Vijayanagara, is a study in how borrowing at the level of both the verse and the narrative can teach us much about the poets' 'historicising engagement with the literary tradition.' As he traces literary borrowings from both Sanskrit and Telugu poetry in Gaṅgādevī's work, Padova illustrates how these 'layers of *kāvya*' point to a clear concern among poets of the second millennium CE for the 'question of form in historical narration.' This ultimately allows him to discuss the existence of a common, generally accepted mode of composition for 'historical' *kāvya* and shed light on the literary fortune and circulation of these works in the late medieval period.

Luther Obrock, in his 'A translation of the *Sujanadurjanavivaraṇa*, the second chapter of Maṅkha's *Śrīkaṇṭhacarita*,' introduces us to a crucial canto in Maṅkha's (twelfth-century Kashmir) court poem, in which *kāvya* is portrayed as being in a state of decline; however, 'a true poet [...] can revive the ideal of poetry.' The chapter, an overview of 'Good and Bad Men,' is not only an important work of poetry but also a meta-reflection on poetry itself. Poetry is on the side of the 'Good Men' and the chapter paints *kāvya* as 'an ethical stance,' in a 'battle demanding the participation of an educated and involved audience.' Obrock demonstrates that Maṅkha was most interested in the effects that poetry could have on the world and what made poetry successful. The second chapter of the *Śrīkaṇṭhacarita* is a window into the 'intellectual life of poetry in medieval Kashmir' and a brilliant example of *kāvya* telling 'its own story.' Obrock's translation of the entire chapter is furnished with detailed notes on questions of translation and grammar, but he also frequently allows us to hear the opinions of the commentator Jonarāja, one of Kashmir's great historians after Kalhaṇa.

Andrey Klebanov focuses on the historical context and intellectual milieu of the commentators of Sanskrit court poems in his chapter 'On the "Bengali school" of commentaries on the *Kirātārjunīya*' by Bhāravi. His approach is not one of searching for historical clues in Bhāravi's poem itself, but rather of shedding light on the history of the text's transmission in a localised, seemingly hermetic scholarly milieu. With textual reuse as his hermeneutic tool, Klebanov examines the connections between four commentaries—the *Kirātapañjikā* by Suvarṇarekha, the *Sārāvalī* by Harikaṇṭha, the *Kirātacandrikā* by Pītāmbara, and the *Subodhaṭīkā* by Ṭalaṇa—whose distinct style and engagement with the core text allows them to be seen as 'comprising a distinct local tradition of interpreting the *Kirātārjunīya*.' In particular, by introducing and describing the manuscripts that preserve the *Kirātapañjikā* and the *Kirātacandrikā*, he analyses the text-historical data

gleaned from both internal content and external sources and highlights the regional and intellectual influences of the Bengali school of interpretation on Sanskrit literature. Klebanov's chapter is prosopographical, with connections being made not only between the commentators creating a clear chain of transmission, but also between the authors and their greater intellectual and historical contexts. Klebanov's chapter gives us 'a rare glimpse into the scholarly methods and extensive learning involved in the composition of commentaries on literary works' and showcases the 'profound knowledge and intellectual engagement' of these premodern scholars.

Ofer Peres' 'Real places imagined: On the historical value of Tamil *Talapurāṇam*s' brings to life the hustle and bustle of sixteenth-century Tiruvaṇṇāmalai. Peres explores the genre of the *talapurāṇam*s, 'place descriptions,' and focuses on the *Aruṇakirippurāṇam* composed by Maṟaiñāṇa Campantar (sixteenth century CE), a poem describing Aruṇācalam/Tiruvaṇṇāmalai and its environs. He undertakes a deep philological, cultural, and historical analysis of the role of *pāraśava*s, temple drummers, who are repeatedly mentioned by Maṟaiñāṇa Campantar in what he calls the 'lyrical prelude' of the poem. His findings are significant and tell us much about the social history of a group of people who otherwise do not find representation in 'traditional' historical records. Thanks to this analysis of the text, supported by evidence from temple inscriptions, Peres opens a window into the temple life of sixteenth-century Tiruvaṇṇāmalai, which would otherwise remain obscure and proves that 'pre-modern literary texts can help to fill in' many of the gaps in our knowledge on the complicated ecosystem of the pre-modern South Indian temple.

Lidia Wojtczak explores the revival and transformation of messenger poetry (*dūta-* and *sandeśakāvya*) in medieval Kerala as part of a broader ideological and literary movement shaped by the region's post-Cēra political fragmentation in her chapter '*Brahmakṣetra*, *brahmakṣatra*: The Keralan literary landscape in messenger poetry.' Wojtczak situates the regional Sanskrit works of the *Śukasandeśa* (thirteenth to fourteenth century CE) and the *Kokilasandeśa* (fifteenth century) within the development of an independent Sanskrit tradition that responded to the local religious, political, and social realities. With their detailed evocations of temple towns, Brahmin settlements, and scholarly centres, these works construct literary maps of the Malabar coast and map a *brahmakṣetra* or *brahmakṣatra*, a Kerala imagined as a land governed by Brahminical authority, both spiritual and social. Wojtczak argues that these *kāvya*s do not merely describe geography; they create cognitive spaces. Moreover, the medieval boon in the production of Keralan *sandeśakāvya*s 'could have been part of the program of pro-

jecting a romanticised past onto an uncertain and precarious present.' By examining what these poems include and exclude, Wojtczak reveals how messenger poetry served not only as a literary form but also as a tool for cultural memory and regional identity-making in early modern South Asia.

Judit Törzsök continues on the topic of aerial journeys in her 'Murāri's aerial view of India: Searching for historical clues in the *Anargharāghava*' by analysing the scene of the flight of Rāma, Sītā, and Lakṣmaṇa from Laṅkā to Ayodhyā in Murāri's play *Anargharāghava* (ninth century CE). While the subject of the play is mythological, the flight sequence functions less as a geographic account and more as a canvas for intertextual reflection and subtle historical signalling. Törzsök examines how historical cues are woven into the fabric of this scene and throughout the play, not through explicit events, but through stylistic, religious, and iconographic references. For instance, the pervasive presence of Śiva, along with the subordination of Viṣṇu, suggests a Śaiva religious orientation for either the poet or his patronage. Moreover, the prominence of sacred sites from the Andhra region, along with distinctive iconographic features—such as the depiction of a one-legged Śiva whose form is attested in Odisha and southern Andhra—anchors the work in a specific cultural geography. Törzsök connects such iconographic evidence, corroborated by art-historical research, to broader religious and regional affiliations, offering insights into the intellectual environment in which the play was composed. The evidence presented in the chapter additionally allows Törzsök to formulate a new hypothesis about the time and place of the poet Murāri.

Dominic Goodall shifts the focus to inscriptions with his chapter 'Khmer history through *kāvya*? An edition and translation of K. 1236 (763 CE) of the reign of Jayavarman I *bis*,' and presents the reader with the panegyric *kāvya* found on an eighth-century rock inscription of King Jayavarman I *bis* of Cambodia. Goodall's chapter is both a philological enterprise, as he reconstructs, translates, and annotates the text of this important Sanskrit inscription, as well as an exploration of the historical significance of the flowery panegyric to the king. Goodall points out that not only historical facts about King Jayavarman I *bis* may be gathered from the text, but that the cultural history the inscription speaks to is just as significant. We learn about the author of the text and his milieu, including the aspirations of his royal patron. Goodall shows us clearly that the poet was a man well-versed in not only the classics of Sanskrit poetry but also in the *Śvetāśvataropaniṣad* and Daṇḍin's treatise on poetry, the *Kāvyādarśa*. The style of the inscription, as Goodall proves, is up to date with the trends of the Indian subcontinent, which could, as Goodall notes, suggest 'rather close communication

between even the more distant parts of the world of Sanskrit influence' already in the pre-Angkorian period.

Lastly, Dániel Balogh brings a taste of Digital Humanities in his chapter 'Textual analysis methodology and royal representation in copperplate grants' by discussing a replicable methodological framework for integrating digital textual analysis into historical research. In particular, Balogh uses the CATMA digital annotation tool to code and analyse the highly formalised, concise, and rhetorically efficient copperplate land grant charters issued by the Eastern Cālukyas, focusing on the representation of public personages as they 'would have been perceived by the original audience [...] in the historical context in which they were circulated.' With his research, Balogh shows that the methodology of textual analysis applied to these texts provides researchers with precious data that integrates and enriches that which can be obtained through a study conducted using more traditional methods—in other words, that it is possible to fruitfully bridge a close reading of the textual content with scalable quantitative analysis.

The authors of the chapters shatter the adage that *kāvya* is a literature that sets itself out of time and space, with all traces of the 'historical' erased by the homogeneity of literary conventions, poetic ornament, and studied universality. On the contrary, if we extend our study of *kāvya* beyond these foundational conventions, we immediately meet scores of poets who were not only engaged in decidedly historical projects but were also consciously, bravely, and sometimes even audaciously making history themselves. The chapters show us what can be learned if we read *kāvya* in context, both socio-historical and literary. They illustrate that premodern South Asian poets were deliberately engaging with their past and present, and speaking to future audiences as they entered into literary discussions that had often been going on for centuries.

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We would like to express our sincere gratitude to all those who contributed to the success of the international symposium held at the Accademia delle Scienze dell'Istituto di Bologna on December 15–16, 2022, which laid the foundations for this volume. Our heartfelt thanks go to our co-organiser, Alessandro Battistini, and to our discussants: Victor D'Avella, Martina Dello Buono, Florinda De Simini, Kengo Harimoto, Csaba Kiss, Saverio Marchignoli, and Luigi Singh. We are especially grateful to Florinda De Si-

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Bhūtārthakathane . . . Sarasvatī: Reading Poetry as a History Book brings together ten essays that explore a central tension in the study of historical poetry—the pull between the impulse to extract 'hard' historical facts from poetic texts and the need to attend to the history of poetry itself: its forms, conventions, and evolving self-awareness. The contributors present poets who were not only engaged in distinctly historical projects but were also consciously, bravely, and at times even audaciously making history themselves. They show that premodern South Asian poets deliberately reflected on their past and present while addressing future audiences, participating in literary conversations that had often been unfolding for centuries. This volume will be of interest to scholars of literary history and historical literature, as well as to anyone interested in the study of South Asian poetry.

The series *Studies on the History of Śaivism* publishes primary sources and monographic studies exploring various aspects of the social and doctrinal history of Śaivism, from its origins to the present day. This fully open-access, peer-reviewed series is hosted by L'Orientale University of Naples, Dipartimento Asia, Africa e Mediterraneo, and funded by the ERC Starting Grant Project SHIVADHARMA (Translocal Identities: The Śivadharma and the Making of Regional Religious Traditions in Premodern South Asia) and the ERC Synergy Grant Project DHARMA (The Domestication of Hindu Asceticism and the Religious Making of South and South-East Asia).

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