
UNIT 4 *KATHAS AND CHARITAS**

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4.0 OBJECTIVES

This Unit aims and attempts to familiarise you with the following:

- what are *kavya* and *charita* texts that characterised prolific literary activity beginning from Gupta era,
- how are they useful sources for reconstructing history,
- a historical tradition implicit in these literary creations that needs to be inferred,
- *kavyas* that marked setting of new high and fine standards in textual output and production of creative literature,
- some important *charita* compositions you ought to know about, and
- how can change in language of *kavyas* and *charitas* be seen as signalling a historical change.

4.1 INTRODUCTION

After perusing this Course, you shall have comprehensive understanding and bird's eye view of expression, presentation, representation and manifestation of historical awareness across a variety of sources like *dana-stutis*, *gathas*, *akhyana tradition*, Epics, *Itihasa-Purana* tradition, Buddhist and Jain traditions, inscriptions, Sangam

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corpus, hagiographies and Bhakti literature, genealogies and family histories (*vamshavalis*), so on and so forth. Historical consciousness assumes different forms as inherent and embedded in a wide and diverse range of sources and in this Unit, we will study about *kavyas* and *charitas*, bountiful creation and production of which was not without throwing light on their contemporary events, developments and changes that enables and assists us in reconstructing and reimagining that history. As Romila Thapar (2013: 4) correctly and intriguingly remarks, ‘Historical traditions emanate from a sense of the past’, we will see how in *kavyas* and *charitas* a distinct historical tradition was introduced, imbued and transmitted.

Katha literature in prose genre is discussed in **Unit 2**. Therefore, in this Unit we will be dealing with *kavya* literature under *katha* genre. Within this our focus will be on both poems and plays.

4.2 KAVYA LITERATURE

Dharmashastras had been penned and were being given final shape and form in early centuries of first millennium CE. Grammatical essays like Panini’s *Ashtadhyayi* (c. 500-400 BCE) and Patanjali’s commentary on Panini – *Mahabhashya* (2nd-3rd century BCE) – laid the foundation for Sanskrit literature to grow and flourish. Now was the time for creative literature under connoisseurship and patronage of kings and their courts.

Kavya tradition became a hallmark from Gupta period onwards. In **Unit 15** of our Course **BHIC-132** we called attention to outburst and profusion of literary activity; spectacular growth, progress and refinement achieved and registered by Sanskrit literature; and splendid textual marvels in Sanskrit that characterised Gupta era. *Kavya* and *charita* writings were abundantly authored in this time and times to come. Beginning with Gupta epoch, able and distinguished writers and poets in courtly circles of kingdoms began composing dramas and poems. Thapar (2002: 259) provides overview of this phenomenon:

Poetry and prose in Sanskrit were largely the literature of the elite, the court, the aristocracy, the urban rich and those associated with such circles.

Urban locus of these compositions is underlined by many historians. A departure from previous periods, this literature concentrated on urban background in authorship, content and style. Distinctive city life is apparent and manifest in these texts through references to cities such like Taxila, Mathura, Shishupalgarh, Mahasthan, Nagarjunakonda, Kaveripattinam, etc.

You will read about Ashvaghosha’s *Buddhacharita* under the section ‘*Charita Literature*’ later in this Unit. He also wrote a Buddhist poem titled *Vajrasuchi* which critiqued Brahmins and their social system.

Large chunk of creative literature belonging to this era was to become source of researches and studies on dramaturgy, poetry and literary theory in subsequent period. After splendid contribution by Kalidasa’s writings (You will read about him and his literary marvels under separate Sub-section later in this Unit) creative literature in Sanskrit witnessed and registered a blaze:

- 1) Bharavi wrote *Kiratarjuniya* (its plot is derived from and drawn on a theme from *Mahabharata*: Arjuna’s contestation with Shiva),

- 2) Magha authored *Shishupalavadha* and *Bhatti-kavya*, among other works,
- 3) Bhavabhuti wrote *Malati-Madhava*.

Poetic and prose romances were often based on subject-matters from Epics and Puranic legends or familiar narratives that were, as Thapar (2002: 311) states, 'treated in courtly style and subjected to literary virtuosity of many kinds'. Narrative aspect was, in many cases, subordinated to linguistic embellishment. People of literary merit and talent who, as Thapar (2002: 345) interestingly points out, 'indulged in and acclaimed this degree of literary artifice', were welcome, patronised and employed at royal courts. Lyric poetry, couched in sophisticated form, had much appeal to royal men.

Majority of these plays were romantic comedies. Tragic stories were avoided, perhaps because entertainment was theatre's purpose. Playwright Shudraka, believed to have belonged to royal lineage, wrote the famous *Mrichchhakatika* (Little Clay Cart). Its basic story is about love and romance between poor Brahmin trader Charudatta and beautiful, cultured, accomplished and affluent courtesan Vasantasena. It is deemed one of best productions of ancient drama. It allows us a peek into urban ways and life. Poet Vishakhadatta dramatises political events of the past in his play on Mauryan overthrow of Nandas – the *Mudrarakshasa*. Authored many centuries after Maurya period, it recounts Chandragupta Maurya's ascent to power. Historians gather information about Chandragupta Maurya and his association with Kautilya on the basis of this text. Thapar (2002: 175-76) tells us that when Chandragupta sat on the throne, 'he was then a young man and is thought to have been the protégé of the *brahmana* Kautilya (popularly known as Chanakya), who was his guide and mentor both in acquiring a throne and in keeping it. This is suggested by a range of stories that relate his rise to power, particularly from Buddhist and Jaina texts, as well as by the play *Mudrarakshasa ...*' Vishakhadatta also composed *Devichandraguptam* that tells the story of Gupta emperor Chandra Gupta II's bid and rise to power. In both literary creations we find interesting elements of functioning, nuances and intricacies of royal court, but Thapar (2002: 312) remarks that 'these are significantly different and suggest his sensitivity to changing historical contexts'.

With view and intent to instruct a young prince in ways of the world *Panchatantra* tales were penned. Later, they were elaborated in various versions and travelled west through translations. As a result of cultural interaction and exchange of ideas and artifacts with Greco-Roman world through maritime trade between north-western frontier of Indian subcontinent and Hellenistic land, Thapar (2002: 253) tells us:

Indian folk-tales and fables travelled westwards and collections such as the *Panchatantra* were subsequently translated into neighbouring languages, appearing in European literature under various guises that perhaps included some versions of Aesop's¹ fables.

Vasavadatta by Subandhu was renowned for its literary quality. Banabhatta wrote king Harsha's biography as well as a romantic novel involving a fantasy narrative – *Kadambari*. About this masterpiece Thapar (2002: 312) remarks that it 'has such an involved plot that one almost loses track of the narrative'. Such

¹ A Greek fabulist and storyteller, Aesop (c. 620-564 BCE) has to his credit numerous stories that are now collectively called Aesop's Fables.

intense creativity in literary forms has a striking feature that these poems and plays largely project and reflect human behavior even if only of a certain section or fragment of society – royal people. By and large, the backdrop and context are royal court, royal lifestyle, etc. However, we do have an exception to literary creations enthused with courtly style – the *Kathasaritasagara* (Ocean of Streams of Stories) dated to 11th century CE. Attributed to Somadeva, it is an anthology of prose stories based on a mix of courtly and folk topics, some of which indicate commentaries on travels to far-off lands and soils.

In better-known plays like *Karpurmanjari* by Rajashekhara and *Prabhodhachandrodaya* by Krishna Mishra a religious/sectarian rivalry is visible and evident in form of sharp-edged dialogue. Buddhist and Jain monks and devotees are subjected to satire, and censure and ridiculing is directed at some Tantric Shaiva sects like *Kaulas*². Such Shaiva ritual practices are looked down upon as despicable. This demonstrates the trend towards discussing or at least recognising and acknowledging new emerging cults at court as much as among populace.

4.2.1 *Kavyas* as Part of Courtly Culture

As we have seen, *kavya* genre was integral to courtly culture. It can aptly be called embellished court poetry. Sometimes a poetical piece was authored so skillfully that it could be read both forward and backward, each reading rendering two different tales, such as story of *Ramayana* in one reading and that of *Mahabharata* in other. Recognised medium of these compositions was Sanskrit as royal court's official language, the use of which was now widely adopted, practiced, promoted and encouraged in literary circles. However, Thapar (2002: 259) is able to distinguish between aimed audience of these Sanskrit plays:

Fragments of Ashvaghosha's plays were found in a distant monastery in Turfan in central Asia. The interest of the audience would have been as much in the Buddhist themes as in a relatively new genre of literature. A more accomplished playwright, Bhasa³, whose cycle of plays included the now famous *Svapnavasavadattam*, sought to capture the courtly mood ... His themes concerned incidents from the epics or historical romances, and court audiences enjoyed the amorous exploits of kings. Bhasa wrote for the limited audience of the court circle, whereas Ashvaghosha's plays could have been performed for a wider audience at religious assemblies.

4.2.2 Kalidasa's *Kavyas*⁴

Greatest and most extraordinary Sanskrit poet/dramatist who gave tremendous momentum and push to Sanskrit literature like none other was Kalidasa. His contribution enhanced the prestige of Sanskrit language by leads and bounds and his written gems influenced many poetic writings composed later. He lived in second half of fourth and first half of fifth century CE. He was one of 'nine jewels/ luminaries'

² Also referred to as *Kaulachara* ('*Kaula* behaviour') and *Kaulamarga* ('*Kaula* way, path or practice'), it was a tradition under Tantric Shaivism and Shaktism during first millennium CE. It was known and marked by its distinct rituals and symbolism associated with worship of Shiva and Shakti.

³ As a matter of fact, we know of 13 plays authored by him. He was an important poet who lived in early Gupta phase. Sanskrit is the language in which he wrote but we also find considerable and substantial usage of Prakrit in his dramas. He authored *Dradiracharudatta*. This drama is said to be the precursor of *Mrichchhakatika*. It was *Dradiracharudatta* that was adopted and refashioned as *Mrichchhakatika*. The term *yavanika* is used by him for curtain. This indicates contact with Greeks. Dating for Bhasa is disputed but he is thought to have lived prior to Kalidasa.

⁴ This Section is taken from Unit 15 of Course BHIC-132 written by Dr. Abhishek Anand.

(navaratnas) of Gupta monarch Chandragupta II's court. He wrote dramas like *Abhijnana-Shakuntalam*, *Malavikagnimitram*, *Vikramorvashiyam* and poetic works such as *Raghuvamsham*, *Ritusamhara*, *Kumarasambhavam* and *Meghadutam* (Cloud Messenger) which show unsurpassed and unrivalled literary standards. These textual wonders are unmatched in their verbal and metrical perfection. It is said that he was acquainted with various branches of learning. He is believed to have acquired knowledge of entire Vedic corpus, philosophical systems like Yoga and *Sankhya* along with fine arts like drawing, painting and music.

If, on the one hand, his story of Shakuntala and her ultimate reunion with her lover – king Dushyanta – is his best creation that remains supreme achievement of ancient Indian literature and stagecraft, on the other hand, his *Meghadutam* came to be reckoned as most fascinating poetry ever written in Sanskrit. It is a long lyrical poem that meshes landscape and emotion.



LEFT: Depiction of Kalidasa

Credit: NehalDaveND

Source: Wikimedia Commons (<https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/Category:K%C4%81lid%C4%81sa#/media/File:Kalidas.jpg>).

RIGHT: Sage Durvasa Curses Shakuntala for Being Lost in Fantasy about Her Lover

Dushyant: An Episode from *Abhijnana-Shakuntalam*, c. 1895

Credit: Chore Bagan Art Studio

Source: Wikimedia Commons; https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Durvasa_Shakuntala.jpg

Abhijnana-Shakuntalam is touted as one of best hundred literary compositions worldwide. It was one of earliest Indian literary pieces to be translated into European languages, *Bhagavadagita* being the other. Overtime, it came to be translated into all important languages of the world. Thapar (2002: 311) tells us that it was 'regarded as an exemplar in Sanskrit drama by literary critics, was to be widely discussed both in Sanskrit literary theory, and later throughout Europe, with its impact on German romanticism'.

Meghadutam was lyrically composed in over hundred stanzas. In this literary marvel the exiled Yaksha conveys thorough cloud his love, conjugal devotion and pain of separation from his beloved wife. It is adorned with human

sentiments and striking figures of speech. The similes used by Kalidasa appeal to reader/listener on merit of their imagination, variety and appropriateness. In describing feeling, passion and emotion he stands unmatched. In *Raghuvamsham* he extols all-round victories of Rama and is said to be indirectly pointing some Gupta rulers and their achievements. *Kumarasambhavam* is a tale about Shiva and Parvati's courtship and birth of their son Kartikeya/Skanda/Murugan. *Ritusamhara* describes six seasons and this literary piece is full of elements of *shringara* (decoration and ornamentation). *Malavikagnimitram*, among other things, gives a complete definition of *natya* and attributes of a skilled dancer.

4.2.3 *Kavyas* by Kings

It is interesting to know that besides being a capable king and administrator, Harsha is credited to have authored three plays (*Priyadarshika*, *Ratnavali* and *Nagananda*). Two of these are witty compositions in classical Sanskrit while the third involves a contemplative theme adopted and borrowed from Buddhist thought.

But, there is uncertainty among historians regarding he being the actual composer or if the authorship is ascribed to him only for name sake. His court poet Banabhatta praises him as a man of exceptional poetical skill and some later royal chroniclers also regard and praise him as a literary giant. However, many medieval scholars doubted his authorship of aforementioned texts on drama. It is argued that he may have contributed certain excerpts but as a popular proverb says, Sharma (2018 [2005]: 263) strikingly comments, '... royal authors are only half authors.' One can easily understand and surmise that with the purpose of boosting the image of a ruler, besides victories and conquests various other accomplishments that included intellectual thinking and enterprise, ability to write and associated literary attainments, authoring scholarly works, etc. were credited to him in ancient as well as medieval India. This practice of eulogising patron-king that was started by Harishena⁵ in Gupta emperor Samudragupta's time seems to have percolated till the time of Harsha and seems to have become common and well-established. One can logically deduce that the intent behind this exercise was to win patron-king's favour as well as to authenticate and raise his position and stature among his peers, rivals and subjects. Not only the art and merit of writing but specific authorship became associated with emperors and this might have been the case with Harsha. We have references to princes and kings receiving intellectual training and when composing literary pieces came to be reckoned as 'high culture' it was only natural that reigning kings were credited to have authored significant writings which was not the trend before. This became an indicator of Sanskritic learning, particularly associated with courtly culture. Conscious literary labouring became fashionable as a virtuoso demonstration of skill and proficiency in Sanskrit language. We get references about Sanskrit being taught in royal circles, institutions attached to temples (*mathas*) and monasteries. But, princes had special private tutors.

We are also told about Mahendra Varman I (600-630 CE) belonging to Later Pallavas and a contemporary of Pushyabhuti *samarata* Harsha of Kannauj (in present-day Uttar Pradesh) and Chalukyan emperor Pulakeshin II. To him

⁵ In *Prayaga-Prashasti* inscription about which you will read in next Unit.

we credit the rising political control, strength, sway and dominion of Pallava kingdom. He was also an ardent appreciator, connoisseur and patron of early Tamil cultural development. He is said to have been a poet and dramatist of some repute and standing, and writer of comedy-play titled *Mattavilasa-prahasana* (Delight of Drunkards).

4.2.4 *Kavyas* from Peninsular India: Sangam Age

Sangam literature is earliest available literary source that constitutes and provides a wealth of detail on *Tamilaham/Tamilakam* (early Tamil speaking south India). It is a collection of short and long poetic anthologies on topics that were popular in these ancient societies. For example, many poems tell episodes about raids and plunder. Some tell about abduction and capturing of brides. These are themes common to all heroic literature. They highlight a heroic age of warriors and battles. Many of them mention a warrior, chief or king by name and elaborately describe his military exploits, military successes and other achievements. Many extol and celebrate gifts and donations by him to kinsmen, warriors, bards and other worthy and deserving beneficiaries and recipients.



Maharishi (Great Sage) Agastya, Traditionally Believed to have Chaired First Tamil Sangam

Twelfth Century Stone Sculpture Found at Lakhi Sarai, Bihar and Preserved in Los Angeles County Museum of Art, USA

Credit: Wikipedia Loves Art participant 'team_a'.

Source: Wikimedia Commons; <https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/>

File:WLA_lacma_12th_century_Maharishi_Agastya.jpg

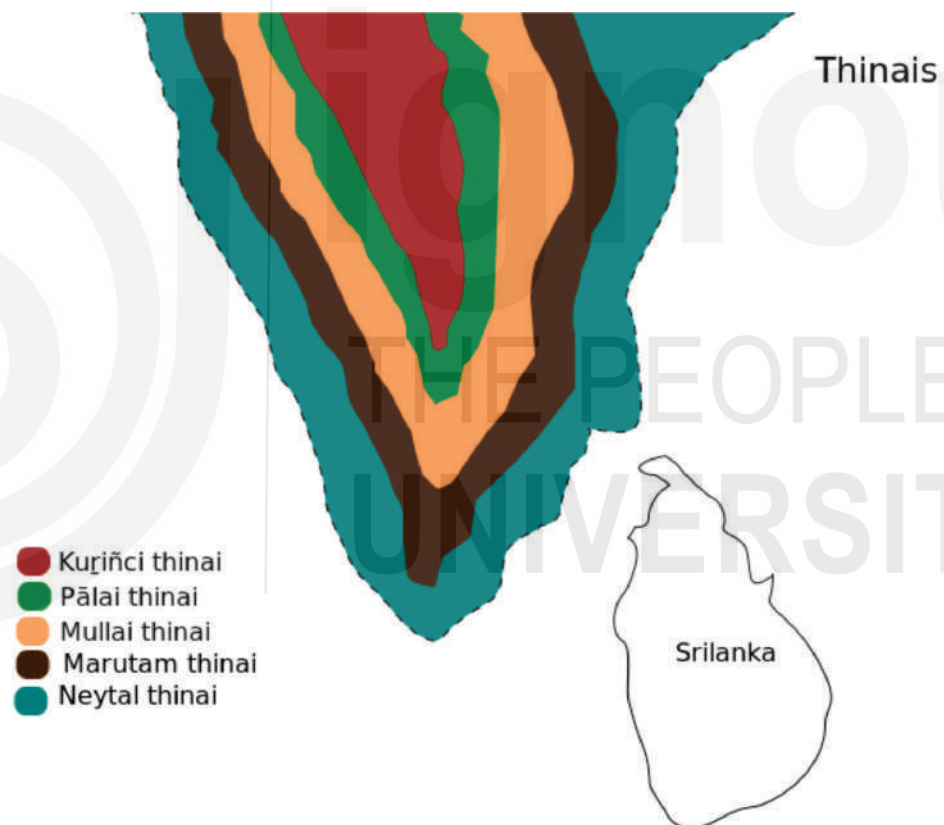
Legend says that three assemblies, academies or colleges (*sangams*), patronised by kings and chiefs, were held, last one at Madurai, where singing bards and poets assembled and their compositions came to be incorporated into Sangam corpus that culminated over a period of three to four centuries. Its precise dating is not free from problems, which complicates its worth, scope and utility as a historical source. Generally, it is ascribed to first four centuries of Common Era. However, Sharma (2018 [2005]: 23) affirms that final compilation lasted till sixth century. The corpus comprises about 30,000 lines of poetry arranged in eight anthologies. Sangam treatises have many layers but these cannot be established at present on the basis of content and style. However, they can be detected on the basis of stages in social evolution. These consist primarily of earliest stratum known as *Ettutogai* and somewhat later strata called *Pattupattu*.

Particularly remarkable aspect of these poems is ecological awareness

and correlation of human activities with environmental concerns and perceptions. It lists five eco-zones (geographical areas with their own peculiar and specific characteristics like climate, soil conditions, social groups and subsistence-patterns) called *aintinai* (five *thinai*):

- a) *Kurinji* (hills and forests/hilly backwoods): hunter-gatherers and those engaged in slash-and-burn cultivation lived here.
- b) *Mullai* (pastoral tracts with low hills and thin forests): dwelling of cattle-keepers/pastoralists and those engaged in shifting cultivation.
- c) *Marutam* (wetlands, fertile agrarian plains): home of agriculturists using plough (chiefly, rice cultivators).
- d) *Neytal* (sea coasts): abode of fishermen, salt-makers and pearl-divers.
- e) *Palai* (arid land): this was infamous for marauders who indulged in wayside robbery.

These ecological zones were not sharply demarcated and separated, and there were overlaps.



Credit: Praveenp.

Source: Wikimedia Commons (https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Thinai_en.svg).

Sangam corpus is not religious literature. Numerous poets composed these poems praising various heroes and heroines. As such, it belongs to the category of secular literature and despite being primitive songs, they comprise literature of high quality and merit when they were penned down subsequently. It seems that these poems were recited in courts. They refer to some Chera rulers who also appear as donors in inscriptions of first and second centuries CE. They also mention several settlements like Kaveripattinam, the flourishing existence of which is archaeologically evidenced and attested. They also talk about *Yavanas* coming in their own vessels, buying pepper in lieu of gold and supplying women slaves and wine to natives. This trade is known not only from Latin and Greek writings but also corroborated from

archaeological findings. As such, despite problematic dating, *Sangam* poetic anthologies comprise a major source of historical information on social, political and economic scenario of deltaic Tamil Nadu in early centuries of first millennium CE. The information it yields on trade and commerce is confirmed by foreign accounts and archaeological records.

You will study at length about historical consciousness in Sangam literature in **Unit 7**.

4.2.5 *Kavyas* from Peninsular India: Post-Sangam Age

In post-Sangam age also, we find *kavyas* from regional kingdoms in peninsular India chiefly in two languages: Tamil and Kannada.

By early and mid-centuries CE Tamil began producing poetry of both lyric and epic variety. Didactic poems of earlier time, such as those of the *Kural* and the *Naladiyar*, frequently drawing upon Jain inspiration and tradition were known and recited. *Shilappadigarama* and *Manimegalai*, the two long Tamil poetic epics dated to mid-first millennium CE, prepared ground for an independent and mature poetic style in Tamil. *Shilappadigarama*'s composer Ilango Adigal was a member of royal family and it is evident that he was partial towards Jain *shramanas* because despite certain religious eclecticism the composition is infused with spirit and temper emphasising on *karma* (human action) and *ahimsa* (non-violence).



Statue of Ilango Adigal, Author of *Silappadigarama*, at Marina Beach, Chennai

Credit: Rakesh.5suthar

Source: Wikipedia Commons; https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Ilango_Adigal_statue_at_Marina_Beach_closeup.jpg

Coming from a merchant family, Chattana authored its sequel that continues the tale and the mood. These poetic works were departures from previous poems and fables about sword-wielding heroes. *Shilappadigarama*'s protagonist is heroine

Kannaki/Kannagi. As the story goes, her husband Kovalan’s unfair implication for stealing queen’s anklet and his subsequent beheading at king’s order without a trial brought about a curse on Madurai city. As a chaste and faithful wife, she eventually ascends as goddess Pattini.

Shilappadigarama and *Manimegalai* are regarded and classified as Epics but their subjects are disparate from epic stereotypes. They contain rich imagery of countryside as well as of the town of Kaveripattinam. Both also underline activities of daily life or the daily hustle-bustle. Vivid and picturesque description of the city comes from *Manimegalai*. Demonstrating classical Tamil style of poetry, they incorporate many expressions and figures of speech invoking the emotion of love. Precedent of such style of writing can be gleaned in earlier *sangam* anthologies. Likewise, a significant contribution of Kannada poetical literature is the famous *Kavirajamarga* dated to 9th century CE.

Development of Tamil poetry was further augmented by a religious movement (*bhakti*) that was popularised by groups and communities of teachers/preachers, hymnologists and poets who are often referred to as ‘saints’ of Tamil devotional sects. They widely used Tamil in their songs and compositions, pushing further its evolution and development compared to other southern languages. Absolute devotion to their deity shaped their primary religious expression. They were seen and revered as charismatic personalities capable of instructing doctrines of *bhakti* and composing dedicational poems. Followers and devotees in large numbers gathered around them.

Urban landscape is amply underscored in these texts. *Shilappadigarama* and *Manimegalai*, both, focus on centrality of the town and descriptions of urban life. As stated before, Kaveripattinam, also known as Puhar/Pumpuhar, is vividly mentioned along with its harbour, merchants’ residences and special part of the city where *Yavanas* lived. We get references of paddy from rural areas arriving in boats to Puhar. Here, it was exchanged in lieu of other merchandise for inland market centres like Madurai, Kanchipuram and Uraiyur. Puhar is depicted as a lively city with affluent lifestyle. Commercial production here was linked to trading in resources from other places:

- 1) beryl from Palghat,
- 2) pearls from further south,
- 3) timber such as ebony, teak and sandalwood from inland forests.

Check Your Progress-1

- 1) What do you understand by *kavya* literature? How is historical consciousness embedded and reflected in such writing?
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- 2) What do you know about Kalidasa and his literary marvels?
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4.3 CHARITA LITERATURE

Simultaneously coexisting with *prashasti* epigraphs about which you will study elaborately in next Unit, we find *charitas* (biographies or eulogies of kings) authored by court-poets or writers directly under their tutelage. However, some decoding is required to understand their purpose. Often, these treatises concentrate on telling the story about a specific issue concerning and crucial to acquiring of power. Such a story is weaved into a narrative and expanded into *charita* text:

- 1) *Harshacharita* written by Banabhatta elucidates accession of king Harsha that entailed usurping the throne and challenging the sanctity of primogeniture (Harsha was his father-king Prabhakara Vardhana's younger son).
- 2) *Vikramankadevacharita* (biography of Chalukyan ruler of Kalyan – Vikramaditya VI [late 11th-early 12th century CE]) by Bilhana clarifies why the emperor was instructed and guided by Lord Shiva himself to overthrow and replace his reigning elder brother.
- 3) *Ramacharita* by Sandhyakara Nandin recounts Pala king Ramapala crushing the revolt by Kaivartas and successfully reasserting and reinstating his power.

In some *charitas* and epigraphs the king is represented as an incarnation of Vishnu or Shiva or being advised directly by the god. This can rightly be construed as yet another way and form of legitimising kingship. We see expanded versions of panegyric format of inscriptions being echoed and paralleled in such chronicles. But, they furnish more detailed histories of rulers and attempt to present kings, dynasties and regions in an accessible manner. In such capacity they may be said to be belonging to another category of textual historical sources known as *vamshavalis* as their focus is history and historical details of a king, dynasty or region. Kalhana's history of Kashmir – *Rajatarangini* – is unusual and unique in this regard because he did search for reliable evidence on the past from a variety of sources. Thus, one cannot deny that his chronicle is an extraordinarily fine specimen of historical writing as it contains references to actual historical events and their descriptions that may be deemed historically insightful. Without an iota of doubt, it is an exceptional literary piece (this is why it is the concern and subject-matter of a separate, subsequent **Unit 6** of this Course), though rooted in *vamshavali* genre of writing, due to Kalhana's extraordinary sense of history. It is also the first 'history-proper' written in Indian subcontinent in actual sense of the term.

Another intriguing point worth remembering is that in 12th-13th centuries CE *charitas* of some merchants of Gujarat were also penned. A biographical treatise from south India was discovered, though more might have been written but are lost. Authored by poet named Atula in 11th century and titled *Mushikavamsha*, it recounts achievements of Mushika dynasty that ruled in northern Kerala.

4.3.1 *Harshacharita*

Harshacharita (The Life of Harsha) is greatest Pushyabhuti king Harshavardhana's biography in form of a lively prose narrative attributed to learned scholar Banabhatta. It is deemed first formal biography of a ruler. It was a prototype of biographical writing in Sanskrit prose. It began the genre of writing known as *charita* literature that was also a *prashasti* at the same time. *Charitas* (historical biographies) became common and fashionable in royal courts in the period to follow.

Notwithstanding the panegyric style, *charita* literature revolves around some salient events. Contemporary perceptions about what was considered significant in events of a ruler's reign are provided by *charita* texts. As such, they must be viewed and understood from historical perspective of that time rather than being judged from modern standards of historical writing. Briefly stated before, one immediate reason for writing *charita* in this case was surely to validate capture of throne by younger brother who was a rival of the elder: an act that overturned the law of succession.

Travelling from Kashmir to various places, gifted and accomplished author Bilhana looked for patronisation, employment, riches and incentives. He was offered a position at the court of Later Chalukyas where he composed *Vikramankadevacharita*. This was, again, a defense of a king capturing the throne from his elder brother. It is important to remember that the idea of seeking historical legitimacy spread far and wide. This can be gauged from shorter chronicles (*vamshavalis*) on lesser dynasties, for instance, 11th century *Mushakavamshakavya* of Atula on a little-known dynasty from Malabar (present-day northern Kerala) that we made a passing reference to earlier. Style, content and structure of such *vamshavalis* was strikingly similar irrespective of whether they were authored in state of Chamba in Himalayas or in Malabar (Kerala). What we must remember is that they are immensely significant to us as kingly, dynastic or regional histories.

Even myths in these texts are sometimes virtually identical. The chronicle traces mythological beginnings, then progresses towards mentioning founding ancestors, then to more authentic genealogical history. Crucial points in the story mark establishment of a kingdom accompanied by categorical changes like more areas opened to cultivation; founding of a capital city with construction and consecration of a royal temple symbolic and emblematic of the royal power; installation of image of king's deity therein; capital city being connected to other places through a network of routes; setting up and presence of an administrative and bureaucratic machinery and permanent standing army; and inscriptions⁶ being issued as official versions and declarations of royal decisions and activities. Subsequently, important events are documented in the chronicle.

4.3.2 *Buddhacharita*

Ashvaghosha⁷ authored a long poem on Buddha's life titled *Buddhacharita*. It became famous and is said to be of seminal importance to the rise of historical biographies. Junagarh Rock Inscription of Rudradaman, about which you will read at some length in next Unit, is an early example of what was to become *prashasti* (eulogy): a style that characterised royal biographies not only in its use of Sanskrit but also in complying to norms regarding describing a conventional *kshatriya* emperor. Such eulogistic epigraphs were also decisive and crucial for later royal biographies composed as part of courtly culture.

As a blueprint of an ideal king, *prashasti* denotes entrenching of monarchy in regions where monarchy had not been so familiar. As a textual format it was evolving. Apparent in *prashasti* epigraphs that extol patron-kings, this literary scheme can be seen even more in *Buddhacharita*. As a means to validate and

⁶ You will study about inscriptions as a historical source in next Unit.

⁷ Some of great creative writers like Ashvaghosha are believed to have been patronised by Kushanas. Besides *Buddhacharita* he wrote *Saundarananda* which is a fine specimen of Sanskrit *kavya*.

authenticate power, *prashasti* could portray even chiefs and governors as ideal *kshatriya* rulers regardless of their origins. Comparisons of kings, governors and chiefs with deities had begun but not in an excessive manner. Ironically, association with divinity became more outspoken when power of the ruler was not so exalted, except in the case of Kushana title of *daivaputra*. Dynasties of central Asian origin exercised choice of investment in local identities and ideologies such as Vaishnavite, Buddhist or Jain and it is interesting that who chose what (In next Unit you will read about Heliodorus Pillar Inscription that mentions one of earliest recorded Greek converts to Vasudeva cult or Bhagavatism).

Ashvaghosha was dexterous in handling Sanskrit. It not only developed as language of the intelligentsia and the literati in all except peripheral regions, it also now became preferred language for reflecting on Buddhism. However, local languages or local Prakrits were not abandoned altogether. But, the tendency to outline and distinguish high culture, i.e. culture of elite and formally educated, from popular culture became more prominent.

4.3.3 *Ramacharita*

We cursorily mentioned about it previously. In this segment we are going to throw some light on this *charita* text by Sandhyakara Nandin that is a biography of later Pala ruler Ramapala. Confronted with the threat of Kaivarta rebellion that aimed to prevent Pala expansion, the biographical treatise recounts how he suppressed it through tactfully and diplomatically handling his *samantas* (feudal lords) and those with subordinate ruling powers and by means of prompt and timely military effort and action. Traditionally, Kaivartas were a low caste of peasants and fishermen. But, retelling of this political event seems to be underlining a revolt by lesser landowners who might have mobilised Kaivarta farmers. It graphically describes the process of Ramapala bestowing lavish gifts to *samantas* and forest-chiefs in order to ensure their support and alliance. Biographical spotlighting of this historical event provides a mine of information on relations and their subtleties between king and his subordinates.

4.4 **KAVYAS AND CHARITAS AS ORNATE LITERARY CREATIONS**

By now you must have known that sixth and seventh centuries was a significant phase in history of Indian literature. Sanskrit was used by ruling category of people or their court-authors from second century CE onwards. To highlight splendour, pomp and vanity of those belonging to royal lineage and in sync with the same the style of Sanskrit poetry and prose became ornate. Perhaps heavily influenced by Kalidasa's writing, Sanskrit poetry and prose now entailed using metaphors, adverbs, adjectives and other creative forms of imagery. Writing became replete with these. *Harshacharita* is a typical example. A masterly composition by Banabhatta in ornate style that became a model for later authors and imitators, it is a flattering account of early years of his patron Harsha.

Sharma (2018 [2005]: 293) informs us:

In poetry, many metres were invented and elaborated to meet the requirements of the new ornate, verbose, high-flown style... This literature greatly strengthened the authoritarian trend in intellectual life, seeking to preserve the state-and varna-based patriarchal society, and to adapt it to new situations.

4.5 SHIFT IN LANGUAGE OF *KAVYAS* AND *CHARITAS* AS A SIGNIFIER OF A HISTORICAL TRANSITION

We made a passing reference earlier to Rajashekhara's *Karpuramanjari*. It was written in Prakrit. In next Unit, you will read about shift in language of inscriptions as a historical shift. Here, it is relevant to elucidate transition in language of biographical and poetical compositions.

You now know that right from early centuries of Common Era, Sanskrit became the language of elite discourse. A noteworthy feature in Sanskrit plays of this period is that people belonging to higher and lower classes are not shown as speaking same language. High status people featuring in these plays speak Sanskrit whereas those of low or ambiguous social status like *shudras* and all women speak Prakrit. In this way, status and gender were linked with language!

However, in its more popular forms Sanskrit contained elements of local Prakrits. Major textual compositions in older tradition of writing in Prakrit include:

- 1) *Gathasaptashati* by Hala. These are short poems mostly on theme of love and joy emanating from it. They are in the form of frank monologues by unmarried ladies or married women. Some of them are overly sentimental in nature and tone, few are rather amorous while others are enjoyably comical.
- 2) Pravarasena's *Setubandha*, also called *Ravanavaho*. It narrates Lanka's siege by Lord Rama.
- 3) Vakpati's *Gaudavaho*. It is a biographical account of king Yashovarman of Kanauj.
- 4) *Karpuramanjari* by Rajashekhara⁸. It is a fictional narrative said to have been written by him to appease his wife Avantisundari who was a woman of refined taste and talent.

Use of local Prakrits, such as Sauraseni Prakrit in which *Karpuramanjari* was composed and Maharashtri Prakrit in which *Gathasaptashati* was composed, in authoring creative literature was on decline but they, nonetheless, boosted rise of Apabrahmsha (literally meaning 'falling away'), initially in western India where it originated, then in other areas (mostly peripheral) and eventually it led to emergence of some regional languages. In the process of speakers of Apabrahmsha shifting to more central locations they took the language with them. Continued usage of regional languages is visible and evident when inscriptions use it alongside Sanskrit or when the Sanskrit used carries identifiable elements of these regional languages. This pinpoints bilingualism to some extent. We can speculate that it would have been more expedient for migrant *brahmanas* to be bilingual, especially in peninsular region. It may also have been possible that the world of courtly literature, being transregional, was primarily using Sanskrit but not without components and portions of local Prakrits. From the process of recognising multiplicity of languages as per location, further diversification between Sanskrit and regional languages acknowledged and perceived in part

⁸ Rajashekhara is the same author who penned *Kavyamimansa* in 9th-10th century CE. It delineates and explains features of a good poem and in this capacity, it is essentially a practical guide for poets.

as function of the dominant Sanskrit language itself would have followed. No doubt, Sanskrit was the dominant language but it did not exclude local linguistic style and rhetoric both at royal court and elsewhere. Surfacing of regional languages did not occur overnight. These were substratum languages used by many social groups and communities. When those speaking these languages rose in status, the status of their language was elevated as well. Identities were gradually created from multiple creative expressions in literature and arts. New languages often became carries of new ideas.

Prakrit, being more closely linked to popular speech than Sanskrit, was also encouraged and promoted outside court circle. Vimalasuri penned *Paumachariyam*⁹. It is a Jain version of Lord Rama's story. This text is remarkable and notable not only for presenting views different from those of Valmiki but also for reiterating and foregrounding function of the Epic as popular literature catering and appealing to the masses. An intriguing facet of Jain literature was telling episodes from Lord Rama's story from Jain perspective' (for details see **Unit 3**). Novels by Jain scholars often deviated to a lesser or greater extent from established versions of Valmiki's *Ramayana*.

It is interesting to note that during first millennium CE and early centuries of second millennium CE writers of heterodox sects – Buddhism and Jainism – also started authoring their works in Sanskrit, some of which belonged to *charita* genre. Sanskrit began to be quite extensively taught and used in both Buddhist and Jain learning centers. Jain scholar Bhadrabahu II wrote *churnis*, *niryuktis* and *bhashyas* that were commentaries on sacred treatises of Jains and we know of Sanskrit compositions as part of Jain religious literary tradition like *Adipurana* and *Yashatilaka*. Jains frequently composed narratives, chronicles and biographies of rulers and accounts of royal courts in addition to religious treatises. Scholars and writers kept track of activities of various Jain sects and their teachings imparted some historical flavour to their compositions like it was done earlier in Buddhist tradition. In this way, Jain tradition paralleled and emulated Buddhist tradition with respect to historical writing. Later composers like Hemachandra in 12th century and Merutunga in 14th century carried forward the tradition and legacy of this genre of writing. A good example of sophisticated scholarship combining critical interpretation, explanation and commentary with some history is *Dvayashraya-kavya*. Jain texts like *Parishishtaparvan* and *Prabhandhachintamani* were modelled on *prabandha* (narrative/semi-historical anecdotal accounts) style. Penning biographies and hagiographies¹⁰ incorporated essays on life, preaching and activities of Mahavira such as *Mahaviracharita*.

Check Your Progress-2

- 1) Describe *charita* form of writing with reference to one *charita* composition. In your opinion how can these textual compositions be treated as historical treatises?

.....

⁹ Written around third century CE, it, curiously enough, mentions Ravana of *Ramayana* belonging to Meghavahana lineage of Chedis to which famous ruler Kharavela belonged.

¹⁰ You will study about them in **Unit 9**.

- 2) Fill in the blanks:
- travelled fromto various places seeking fortune and employment until he was given a position at the court of the where he wrote
 - Ramacharita* recounts Pala king Ramapala crushing the revolt by..... It was written by
 - was first formal biography of a ruler. It was written by

4.6 SUMMARY

After reading this Unit, you must have learnt that each category of writing in ancient Indian past has its own way of documenting and capturing that past. Our colonial masters accused ancient Indians of absence or lack of sense of history. They took upon themselves the mammoth task of researching and writing Indian history with view and intent to know about land and people they aimed and sought to rule and govern and, secondly, to justify their ‘civilising mission/white men’s burden’ and their claim that India was a primitive land. Yes, ancient Indians did not write history in the way it is done today and true that India did not produce a **Herodotus** or Thucydides till the time of Kalhana who chronicled *Rajatarangini* as historical narrative of kings and dynasties of Kashmir in early twelfth century CE.

But, we have amply demonstrated and argued that historical value, significance, scope, utility and credibility of *kavyas* and *charitas* cannot be ignored, sidelined, marginalised or brushed aside. They display and demonstrate considerable historical sense but history in these sources is not available ‘readymade’, rather it has to be sifted and culled. As such, they cannot be dismissed as ‘non-historical’ or ‘ahistorical’ texts as we have sufficiently and convincingly seen in this Unit. Sharma (2018 [2005]: 23) rightly observes and surmises about writings of Banabhatta, Kalidasa, Bhasa, Shudraka etc:

Apart from their literary value, they mirror the conditions of the times to which the writers belonged ... Besides being great creative compositions, they provide us with glimpses of the social and cultural life ...

We saw that *charitas* were essentially based on historical subjects as their plot revolved around an actual (not mythical), historical figure or personality. Particularly about *Harshacharita* Sharma (2018 [2005]: 26) points out:

Although highly exaggerated¹¹, it gives an excellent idea of court life under Harsha and the social and religious life of his age.

4.7 KEYWORDS

Dharmashastras

Ancient Indian manuals/compendiums on moral and social norms and code of conduct for adherence, observance and practice by a Hindu. *Manava-dharma-shastra* (known as *Manusmriti* in common

¹¹ It is beyond doubt that the object of *charita* texts was to applaud, glorify and celebrate the patron.

parlance) is one of them. P. V. Kane in his book *History of Dharmasastra* (five volumes in eight parts) has extensively researched on them

Herodotus

Called the father of history, he was a Greek historian in ancient time. He portrayed a fascinating and fanciful image of Indian subcontinent that is said to have tempted Alexander to invade it

Yavanas

Sharma (2018 [2005]: 200) tells us that this term initially referred to Greeks but over time it denoted all people of foreign origin

4.8 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS EXERCISES

Check Your Progress-1

- 1) See Section 4.2
- 2) See Sub-section 4.2.3

Check Your Progress-2

- 1) Consult Section 4.3
- 2) a) Bilhana, Kashmir, Later Chalukyas, *Vikramankadevacharita*;
b) Kaivartas, Sandhyakara Nandin; c) *Harshacharita*, Banabhatta

4.9 SUGGESTED READINGS

Pathak, V. S., (1966) *Ancient Historians of India: A Study in Historical Biographies* (Bombay: Asia Publishing House).

Sharma, R. S., (2018 [2005]) *India's Ancient Past* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press).

Thapar, Romila, (2002) *Early India: From the Origins to AD 1300* (New Delhi: Penguin).

Thapar, Romila, (2013) 'Historical Biographies: The *Harshacharita* and The *Ramacharita*' and 'Biographies as Histories', in *The Past Before Us: Historical Traditions of Early North India* (New Delhi: Permanent Black).

4.10 INSTRUCTIONAL VIDEO RECOMMENDATIONS

Innovations and Turning Points: Towards a History of Kavya Literature (University of Chicago)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZmNWWihE0JQ>

Andrew Ollett (Harvard University) - Sanskrit as a Metalanguage for Literature in Dandin

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TVgvrr9QGdA>