

Chapter 1



Introduction: The Study of the Sanskrit Court Epic

For the single stanza there are any number of poets;
there are a hundred poets for the short poem.
But for the great poem there is one poet, perhaps two—
three would be hard to find.

Rājaśekhara¹

This book is about a Sanskrit court poem and the aesthetics of a major genre of Indian poetry. The court epics (*mahākāvya*) of the great classical authors occupy a place in the Sanskrit literary tradition comparable to that of Virgil and Dante in the West.² Yet the masterworks of the *mahākāvya* genre have remained largely unknown to readers outside India. In this book I have tried to illuminate for a non-specialist audience the literary strategies of the Sanskrit court epic through the study of an exemplary poem, the *Kirātārjunīya* (*Arjuna and the Hunter*) of the sixth-century author Bhāravi.³

The *mahākāvya* (“great poem”) is a verse genre of *kāvya*, the stylized literature cultivated in the courts of India in the Sanskrit and Prakrit languages from the beginning of the first millennium.⁴ *Kāvya* is literature conceived above all as a form of art in the medium of figurative language. Its purpose is to achieve aesthetic effects through the exquisite manipulation of language and of the conventions of form. *Kāvya* is also, in Leonard Nathan’s felicitous expression, primarily a “literature of affirmation,” celebrating and idealizing the courtly world in which it flourished.⁵

The *mahākāvya* is the most prestigious of the *kāvya* genres, and court epics continued to be written well into the nineteenth century.⁶ Despite the genre’s importance in Sanskrit literature and India’s courtly culture, however, with very few exceptions, neither

traditional poeticians nor modern scholars have given it the careful attention it deserves. On the one hand, Sanskrit writers on poetic theory have failed to develop an adequate critical approach to the *mahākāvya*, focusing instead on the poetics of the drama and the self-contained, quatrain-like verse form that is the standard unit of classical Sanskrit poetry. On the other hand, until recently, specialists in Indian literary studies have approached the Sanskrit *mahākāvyas* as arenas for philological investigation, not as the serious works of literature they are.⁷ It appears that a number of factors, including Western preconceptions about epic poetry and the confusing treatment of the *mahākāvya* in Indian criticism, have conspired to make the Sanskrit court epic largely inaccessible to modern readers.

The study of the *Kirātārjunīya* I offer here is intended to suggest a viable approach to the Sanskrit court epic. I have argued that careful examination of textual passages in the *Kirātārjunīya* reveals the existence of compositional principles unique to the *mahākāvya* genre that resonate with, but are not explained by, conceptual categories in Sanskrit criticism. Secondly, I have suggested that the distinctive classicism of the court epic can be better illuminated through comparison with other kinds of literary discourse in India. A third point is that, while *kāvya* is characterized by a formalist aesthetic, poems such as the *Kirātārjunīya* are deeply engaged with the values and ideologies of the courtly world that they portray, and must therefore be studied in their cultural context. Lastly, I have shown that the Sanskrit *mahākāvyas* challenge conservative theories of epic. Despite its formal and cultural specificity, Bhāravi's poem shares many of the salient characteristics of epic poems across cultural and typological boundaries, strengthening the case for a more flexible conception of epic poetry.

Celebrated as one of the five classics of the *mahākāvya* genre,⁸ Bhāravi's *Kirātārjunīya* is the earliest and most esteemed literary treatment of an important episode in the *Mahābhārata*, India's ancient war epic and a major text on *dharma* (Law, sacred duty), the central principle of the Hindu cosmic and moral orders.⁹ The *Kairāta* episode depicts the Pāṇḍava hero Arjuna's dramatic encounter with Śiva, one of the great gods of the Hindu pantheon, during the forest exile of the five Pāṇḍava princes and their wife Draupadī.¹⁰ Arjuna performs penance in a Himalayan forest in order to propitiate the gods and win from them celestial weapons that will help the Pāṇḍavas overcome their cousins, the Kauravas, in righteous war (*dharmayuddha*) and regain the kingdom that had unjustly been

taken away from them. The drama of the narrative turns on the trial Śiva sets for the hero. Appearing in the guise of a tribal hunter or mountain man (*kirāta*), Śiva quarrels with Arjuna over the shooting of a boar and tests his courage in various kinds of single combat. The god ultimately reveals himself and grants the hero the boon of an invincible celestial weapon, the Pāśupata (*pāśupatāstra*). In the *Kirātārjunīya* Bhāravi transforms the brief episode into an elegant *kāvya* poem, replete with the descriptive and rhetorical topics through which the *mahākāvya* evokes the world of the Indian court.

Arjuna and the Hunter is the only work attributed to Bhāravi, and very little is known about the poet. Bhāravi is named as a great classical poet in an inscription of 634 A.D. of the Chalukya king Pulakesin II, who ruled in the Deccan region of South India.¹¹ References in a work of the critic Daṇḍin (7th–8th centuries) suggest that the poet flourished in the mid-sixth century and was associated with one or more royal houses in what is now Karnataka in the Deccan region.¹² There are no explicit historical references in the *Kirātārjunīya*. In addition to glorifying the god Śiva, the poem's mythical narrative allows the court poet, in a manner characteristic of early *kāvya*, to exalt his patron by identifying him with an eminent hero in the older epic.¹³ Nevertheless, "...texts have ways of existing that even in their most rarefied form are always enmeshed in circumstance, time, place, society—in short, they are in the world, and hence worldly."¹⁴ As I will show in the course of this study, Bhāravi's very choice of narrative and his treatment of it appear to be refractions of his sixth-century South Indian milieu.

From the sixth century onward, the narrative of Arjuna's combat with the *kirāta* has been a popular theme in the literature and arts of South India and the Indianized classical traditions of Southeast Asia. Among the literary treatments is a version of the episode included in the eleventh-century *Arjunawiwāha* (*Celebration of Arjuna*), the oldest court poem (*kaḥawin*) in Old Javanese.¹⁵ The narrative is depicted in sculpture and painting and enacted in various traditions of theater and dance, including the Kathakali dance of Kerala, the *kūttu* ritual drama of the Tamil Draupadī cult, and the Wayang shadow-puppet play of Indonesia.¹⁶ The largest number of literary works on the subject were produced in the Deccan region, in Sanskrit and in Kannada, the language of Karnataka, and many of these are classified as devotional (*bhakti*) texts. Sculptural reliefs depicting the *kirāta*-Arjuna episode adorn nearly every Śiva temple in Karnataka and neighboring areas. In the Deccan, both sculpture and

texts show an awareness of Bhāravi's poem, but also present details from folk and devotional versions of the narrative.¹⁷

The epic theme and the historical and cultural milieu of the *Kirātārjunīya* draw the poem into a web of complex transactions among the discourses of heroic epic and *kāvya*, court and temple, Sanskrit and regional languages, and folk and classical traditions in Indian civilization. Religious devotion (*bhakti*), martial valor (*pauruṣa*), sacred duty (*dharma*), and ascetic self-control (*tapas*), are central themes in the narrative of Arjuna and the hunter in all its versions, from the *Mahābhārata* onwards. However, Bhāravi's treatment of these themes differs in substance and style from nearly every other telling, including the epic source itself. The divergence stems from the trenchant aestheticism of the *Kirātārjunīya*, which contrasts with the very different emphases of the *Mahābhārata* and the later, non-*kāvya* interpretations. The *mahākāvya* poem's social, historical, and cultural meanings are encoded in and experienced through the architectonics of form, the interrelationship of structures. What the *Kirātārjunīya* has to say about ideal values must be grasped in and as the relations of poetic language that constitute it. For this poem, as for any work of art, but perhaps more self-consciously than most, the medium *is* the message.

Indian commentators on the *Kirātārjunīya* have for the most part concentrated on the literary processes that occur at the microscopic level of the stanza, the focus of Indian criticism of the verse genres in *kāvya*. I have paid attention to the commentators and critics. Unlike them, however, I have directed my study towards those aspects of *Arjuna and the Hunter* that for us need the most comment, yet have remained unspoken assumptions in the tradition, "the macroscopic levels of genre, proportions and rhetoric."¹⁸ These, as I will argue below, are the key to a full appreciation of Bhāravi's poem and the court epic form.

The following chapter is devoted to the problem of the poetics of the Sanskrit court epic. Here I discuss the formal features and aesthetic goals of the *mahākāvya* and show how they differ from those of the older epic as well as the other *kāvya* genres. I also show how we might transcend the limitations of both the traditional and the Western critical approaches in understanding the structural strategies of the *mahākāvya*. I argue that in the court epic the design of extended poetic passages is achieved, and their rhetoric advanced, not through the linear movement of narrative, but through the artistic repetition and variation of figures of speech (*alaṃkāra*) and other

compositional elements of the *kāvya* stanza in the larger canvas of verse-sequences and the poem as a whole.

Chapter 3 is an introduction to the *Kirātārjunīya*. In the first part of the chapter the poem is examined in relation to its historical setting, and to the *Mahābhārata* and epic poetry in general. In the remainder of the chapter I provide an overview of the commentators' and critics' application of the aesthetic theory of *rasa* (mood) to the *mahākāvya*, followed by a summary discussion of the noncanonical compositional strategies that I have discerned in Bhāravi's poem.

Chapters 4 through 6 offer close analyses of compositional strategies in the *Kirātārjunīya*'s speeches and descriptions, the two types of poetic passage that characterize the *mahākāvya* style and reflect the political, erotic, and heroic preoccupations of the courtly civilization. The last three chapters focus on the structure and rhetoric of the descriptions and debates surrounding Arjuna's penance, his combat with Śiva, and the god's self-revelation to the hero, key passages and central images in the *Kirātārjunīya*. In the concluding chapter I compare the *mahākāvya* poet's distinctive treatment of the heroic and devotional aspects of Arjuna's encounter with Śiva with the handling of these elements of the narrative in other works on the subject, including visual representations. Throughout, the challenge is to be mindful of the dynamic by which "literature as autonomous language"¹⁹ fruitfully relates to the text as a worldly event in a particular Sanskrit poem.