

# Multiple Literary Cultures in Telugu

## Court, Temple, and Public

**H**istory presupposes a narrative, a story of a process motivated by a causality. And as we have come to realize, such a story sometimes creates the object it purports to merely describe. There was no such thing as “Telugu literature” as we now understand it before literary historians produced its history in the early decades of the twentieth century for the purpose of teaching it in colleges, or to fill a perceived gap in knowledge. A history of Telugu literature required a beginning, dates for poets and their patrons, a geography of literary production, and a connected narrative, which scholars have worked hard to construct. In this essay I try to avoid such construction. I do not tell a story of events by narrating them chronologically. Instead I give a somewhat loosely connected but interrelated configuration of literary culture as it manifested itself in the geographical area of South India. The gaps that I leave are deliberate.

### **Linguistic and Geographical Boundaries of Telugu Literary Cultures**

Modern political and linguistic boundaries can create confusion when we talk of literary cultures that pre-date them. It is therefore necessary to remind ourselves that during the premodern period, which is my primary focus in this essay, in many of the geographical locations dis-

cussed here Telugu was one of several languages in which literature was being produced. Poets who wrote in Telugu read and interacted with other languages widely used among scholars of their time. Among these languages, three had a direct impact on the making of literary texts in Telugu: Sanskrit, Tamil, and Kannada. Knowledge of Sanskrit was required for a person to be literary in Telugu—the Sanskrit of *purāṇa* and *kāvya*, if not the Sanskrit of *śāstra* and *Veda*. Tamil was a canonical language for Vaiṣṇava Telugu poets, just as Kannada was for those who were Vīraśaivas. Although its influence is not clearly visible on the surface, Persian did have an impact on Telugu literary culture, especially during the late sixteenth century.<sup>1</sup> However, with the significant exception of Pāṅkurīki Somanāthuḍu, who wrote in both Telugu and Kannada, every one of the poets I discuss here wrote only in Telugu.

Also, all poets seem to have been aware that they were participating in an enterprise of writing in Telugu. One of the earliest of these poets, Nannaya (eleventh century), expressly stated that he was writing “in Tēnugu” for the welfare of the world (apparently meaning the Telugu world). Nannēcoḍuḍu (twelfth century) spoke of the Cāḷukya kings who established “literature in Telugu.” In the following generation, Tikkana (thirteenth century) had in view a people he called *āndhrāvali* (Andhra people).<sup>2</sup> The poets who established literary traditions different from Nannaya’s also expressed a clear awareness of belonging to the Telugu language, even as they were conscious of their own traditions with their own intertextual underpinnings and shared cultural discourse. Such an awareness made them participants in a common activity of writing in Telugu, even though their literary traditions varied. These disparate traditions were later reformulated as if they belonged to a linear and continuous story, and acquired the name Telugu literature.

The geography of these literary traditions is not as unified as the conceptual area of Telugu literature. Present-day Andhra gives the secure impression that the literary geography of Telugu is easily definable as the area we call Andhra Pradesh. The history of Telugu literary production gives the lie to this assumption, showing both that Andhra did not always correspond to Andhra Pradesh and that Telugu literature was

produced in many areas that are not included in the Andhra Pradesh of today. Tikkana, writing from Nellore in the thirteenth century, had a concept of Andhra that included coastal Andhra and Rajahmundry, from where Nannaya had written a couple of centuries earlier. But Śrīnāthuḍu, writing in the late fourteenth century from the same Rajahmundry, had a much narrower concept of Andhra. For him, the center of the Andhra country was the Godāvārī delta.<sup>3</sup> During the reign of Kṛṣṇadevarāya, who called himself a Kannada king (*kannaḍarāya*), sixteenth-century Hampi, now located in the state of Karnataka, was the center of Telugu literary activity. Later, when the Telugu Nāyaka kings ruled the southern kingdoms of Madurai and Tañjāvūr, the center of Telugu literary production was located in the far south, where the predominant spoken language was Tamil. Telugu continued to be a language of literature in the Tamil-speaking south long after the decline of the Nāyakas. Even when Telugu literature was produced in areas that are now in Andhra Pradesh, Telugu was not always the only language of importance. For instance, during the reign of the sultans of Golconda, the language of administration was Persian, but Telugu poets flourished in the court and Telugu was accepted as a language of culture as well. The northwestern temple town of Śrīśailam, where Pāḷkuriki Somanāthuḍu wrote in the thirteenth century, was a multilingual center where Śaiva devotees spoke Telugu, Kannada, Tamil, and Marathi; and southeastern Tirupati, where Annamayya and his family members wrote in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, was a center for at least two major languages, Telugu and Tamil.

In contrast, the kings of the Kākatīya dynasty ruling from Warangal and the Rēḍḍi kings ruling from Kondavidu, Rajahmundry, and Addanki—all of which were right in the thick of the Telugu-speaking area—did not evince much interest in encouraging Telugu poetry. They favored Sanskrit poetry instead. The Kākatīyas honored the Sanskrit poet Vidyānātha as their court poet, and the Rēḍḍis celebrated Vāmana Bhaṭṭa Bāna as theirs. Meanwhile, the greatest Telugu poet of the time, Śrīnāthuḍu, was traveling from king to king and patron to patron all over the region including Kannada- and Tamil-speaking areas, receiving honors as well as audience for his poetry before finally being invited by

Virabhadra Reddi, the ruler of Rajahmundry, to dedicate his *Kāśikhanda* to him.

Clearly, language boundaries were much more porous in premodern south India than they are now, and literary production was not always associated with the majority language spoken in the area. Nor can we arrive at a neat, chronologically connected narrative of Telugu literary developments. We might love to imagine a definite, Aristotelian beginning, middle, and end for a narrative of literary history, such that this mass of events from Andhra would not frustrate us and appear wholly uncharted. But the search for chronology, the bulwark of positivist literary historians, frustrates even the most dedicated scholars as book after book turns up without a definite date of its composition or precise biographical details of its author.

Indeed, in this foggy chronological domain, finding a single author who gives a precise date for the composition of his book is cause for celebration. Appakavi, who we know decided to write one of his books on an evening in the year 1656 (Śaka 1578) in the village of Kāmapalli (probably in Guntur District), is just such an author.<sup>4</sup> I begin my essay with him—and not just because he gives us this precious bit of chronological information (which, as we will see, is immediately followed by a story of an altogether different historical order). Appakavi gives us a rich literary-cultural discourse and provides a vantage point from which to look back in time as well as forward.<sup>5</sup>

First, the story: One night the god Viṣṇu appeared to Appakavi in a dream, along with his insignia (the conch and the wheel) and his two wives, Lakṣmī and Bhūdevī. The god formally introduced himself and his wives, and he told Appakavi that he should write, in the Telugu language, the great grammar that Nannaya, the first poet, had composed in Sanskrit *sūtras*. These *sūtras* had been lost for centuries because Bhīmakavi, Nannaya's rival, threw the only copy into the Godāvarī river in retaliation for Nannaya's suppression of Bhīmakavi's own book on meter.

Fortunately, however, Nannaya's student, Sāraṅgadhara, had memorized every verse of the book before Bhīmakavi threw it away and thus had preserved it. This Sāraṅgadhara was none other than the son of

Rājarājanarendra, the patron king of Nannaya. According to a story well known in Appakavi's time, to which the poet refers, this king had married a young wife in his old age. The young wife fell in love with her stepson, Sāraṅgadhara, and enticed him to her palace. When Sāraṅgadhara refused to reciprocate her affection, the queen spoke false charges against him to the king, who hastily ordered his son's arms and legs to be cut off and the young man cast into the wilderness. But Sāraṅgadhara miraculously survived with the aid of a *siddha* (perfected being), Matsyendra-nātha, and he became a *siddha* himself, hence immortal. Having saved Nannaya's book from extinction, Sāraṅgadhara even gave a written copy of it to Bālasarasvati—a contemporary of Appakavi, who recorded this chain of transmission. Bālasarasvati had also written a gloss on the lost text.

Now the god was asking Appakavi to write an elaborate commentary on this first Telugu grammar of Nannaya's. But how would Appakavi get a copy of this book? This problem of the missing text was neatly solved by the god's promise that the next day a certain Brahmin from Mataṅga Hill (near Hampi) would personally deliver a copy to Appakavi.

There is more to the story. But let us pause to ask why anybody would even need this grammar, since for centuries poets had managed quite well without it. In the absence of the rules of an authoritative grammar, says the god, a certain *kavirākṣasudū*—a fierce and powerful poet—had made a rule that no poet could ever use a Telugu word unattested in Nannaya's Telugu retelling of the Sanskrit *Mahābhārata*. Because of the lack of a grammar, the earliest poet's text itself had come to serve as an empirical source for ordering the language. Now, however, Appakavi's new Telugu version of the absent grammar would open up the generative resources of the language and also confer authority.

An earlier grammar, *Āndhrabhāṣabhūṣaṇamu* by Ketana (thirteenth century), had no prescriptive authority. Ketana even modestly requests poets to bless his efforts and, if they find errors in his work, to kindly correct them.<sup>6</sup> He is far from assuming the authority of legislator of language, the title by which Appakavi recognizes Nannaya. Clearly, Appakavi found himself in a new situation, marked by an urgent need

to establish the authority of grammar over poetry. And indeed, Appakavi exhibits a profound sense of confidence. He states that his book is as basic to Telugu as Pāṇini's *Śabdānuśāsana* is to Sanskrit. This is not just poetic license; he is relying on a tradition of several hundred years of linguistic creativity, during which Telugu literary culture had established for itself a certain social presence. Now Appakavi proceeds to give voice to an anthropology of poetry, to its power of producing political and social reality, and its role in ordering its own universe.

In Appakavi's words, a poem received by a patron brings him good luck or bad luck depending on its "marks," in the same way that a horse, a gem, or a woman acquired by him would. These things, if properly chosen for their lucky marks, could turn him into a rich man or, alternatively, leave him a beggar. In the case of poems, lucky marks are features of the correctness of the language and meter used by the poet. The power of the language used in a poem has a long prehistory, which has been ingrained in the minds of literate people. Building on this belief, Appakavi relates another belief, at least as old as the twelfth century, that a poem is one of the seven "children" a person could have.<sup>7</sup> A son, a water tank, a poem, an endowment, a temple, a grove, and a Brahmin settlement—these seven ensure life after death for the patron. Six of the seven fall into ruin in the course of time; poetry is the sole exception. So Appakavi recommends poetry as the most praiseworthy item for all patrons to acquire. But there is something even more valuable in poetry: However bad a patron's life might be, the poet can make him good. Just as drainage water from the city flows into the Godāvārī river and becomes pure, even a person who has lived a bad life can be rendered pure in the poet's depiction. The illustrations Appakavi presents as evidence for this image-building transform the Sanskrit poets Vālmīki and Vyāsa into court poets who served their patrons: Vālmīki made Rāma known, and Vyāsa made the Pāṇḍavas known, by writing their lives into poetry.

Underlying Appakavi's entire presentation, though left unmentioned, are the grammarian and the scholar-interpreter of grammar. The poet creates his poem within the rules set by the major grammar texts,

which were written by ancient givers of laws of grammar. In this case, Nannaya is such a lawgiver and Appakavi is the commentator who interprets this old text. The commentator and the lawgiver form the world in which the poet works, so that it functions according to rules. The patron flourishes only if the poet executes the poem strictly within this rule-bound world.

The world of poetry that Appakavi imagines is remarkably analogous to the Brahminical social world. In the human world, the Veda and *śāstra* dictate the law; the Brahmin *purohita*, or ritual specialist, interprets the law; and the king administers it for the benefit of his subjects. In the literary world, similarly, the ancient texts on grammar and poetics give the law of language and poetic rules, the grammarian interprets the rules, and the poet executes the poem according to the rules for the enjoyment of cultivated readers. The following represents the homology:

	World of People ( <i>laukikajagat</i> )	World of Poetry ( <i>kāvyaajagat</i> )
Law	Vedic texts (Veda and <i>śāstra</i> )	grammar ( <i>lakṣaṇa</i> )
Interpreter	Brahmin ( <i>purohita</i> )	grammarian ( <i>lākṣaṇika</i> )
Executor	king ( <i>rāja</i> )	poet ( <i>kavi</i> )
Recipient	subjects ( <i>prajā</i> )	readers ( <i>sahṛdayas</i> )

However, the literary world did not behave according to Appakavi’s imagination. That Appakavi had to visit the remote past of Nannaya’s time and invent a whole grammar that had been lost until now, and that he needed the immortal Sāraṅgadhara and the god Viṣṇu to arrange for the delivery of that grammar, clearly suggest that he needed a power structure to confer the authority necessary to create a new literary world. To understand this more clearly, let us briefly take a look at the world of Telugu literary culture during Appakavi’s time and in the centuries immediately preceding it.

In the century before Appakavi, a profound shift in the world of poetry had made the patron of poetry, the king, completely independent of the poet. He no longer needed the Brahmin as poet to elevate his status, to make him king. The king now assumed the position of the god himself. The most that a poet could do was to serve the king by

celebrating his glory. I elaborate on this situation later, in the section on the Nāyaka courts; stated briefly, in preference to Brahmin men, courtesans and non-Brahmin men were now chosen as court poets. These poets did not feel superior to the king and therefore did not have any problem serving him. Not too long before Appakavi we find an unusual complaint in the words of Dhūrjaṭi, who lamented:

Town after town  
 every street singer becomes a poet.  
 They go to these two-bit kings who cannot tell good from bad  
 and praise them as the best connoisseurs of arts.  
 Poetry is cheap.  
 God of Kālahasti,  
 where do good poets go?<sup>8</sup>

Clearly, Appakavi wished to restore a world he thought was lost or had degenerated, but he unwittingly presented a world of mean competition, personal jealousies, and unethical acts, like destroying a rival poet's work (almost as if it was a routine occurrence since the beginnings of Telugu literature). Nannaya himself, who was held in high reverence by Appakavi and was respected by the god, participated in such acts. However, this detail was lost on Appakavi, as well as on his readers, who were taken by the glory in which Appakavi presents Nannaya and his grammar. In a way, Appakavi was not inventing this glory. Nannaya was already recognized as the first poet, the inaugurator of Telugu poetry, by a number of poets previous to Appakavi. We find a Telugu literary world articulated as early as the sixteenth century. The following poem by Rāmarājabhūṣaṇuḍu, author of *Vasucaritramu*, addresses the Goddess of Speech, mentioning a "universe of Telugu words" (*āndhrōktimayaprapaṅcamu*)—in other words, Telugu literature.

You are created by the Maker of Speech  
 and nurtured by the Master of Words;  
 The Moon and the Sun brighten you  
 and the Lord of Wealth protects you;  
 I celebrate your glory  
 in the universe of Telugu words.<sup>9</sup>

Through a series of somewhat constrained puns, the verse invokes both a genealogy of poets and the major Hindu deities. References are to the Maker of Speech (Brahmā as well as Nannaya, who is credited with creating a literary language in Telugu), the Lord of the World (Śiva and also Ērrāpragaḍa, who is called the supreme master of poetic compositions, or *prabandhaparameśvaruḍu*), the Moon (Soma and also Nācana Somuḍu, who wrote *Harivaṃśamu*), the Sun (Bhāskara along with Huḷakki Bhāskaruḍu, who composed a Rāma story, popularly known as *Bhāskararāmāyanamu*, in Telugu), and the Lord of Wealth (Viṣṇu as well as Śrīnāthuḍu, the great poet of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries). This is indeed an interesting list of poets, and the tone of the poem suggests an authoritative structure of the literary past, indeed, a canon of great poets.

However, what Appakavi seeks to express is not just the greatness of the poet as a creator of literary texts; he wants the poet to be subjected to the superior authority of the grammarian and the maker of the rules of meter—the poet should be only the executor of literary texts within the rules of grammar and metrical texts. To see Appakavi's worldview in perspective, we should pursue the main strands of competing literary cultures that preceded Appakavi and were in some ways still active during Appakavi's time.

### **The First Poet and the Production of a Brahminical/Puranic Literary Culture**

Contrary to the conventional picture of the reader and the poet detailed earlier, and the ideological support articulated by Appakavi, Telugu did have multiple literary traditions and cultures, sometimes competing with each other but most of the time continuing in relative independence, each with its own poetics and aesthetics, and often with its own audience. I focus here on four of these, which I will call the Brahminical/Puranic, anti-Brahminical, courtly, and temple traditions. I discuss as the major poets of these literary cultures Nannaya (eleventh century) for the Brahminical tradition; Somanāthuḍu (thirteenth century) for the anti-Brahminical tradition; Nannēcoḍuḍu (twelfth century), Śrīnāthuḍu

(fourteenth century), Pēddana, and Rāmarājabhūṣaṇuḍu (both sixteenth century) for the courtly tradition; and Potana (fourteenth century) and Annamayya (fifteenth century) for the temple tradition. Throughout my discussion, using both written texts and *cāṭus* (oral verses circulated among literate people), I outline some of the main features of these traditions, which lead up to the popular perception of Telugu poetry and poets as reflected in seventeenth-century legends about them. Then I consider issues relevant to each of these literary cultures, such as choice of literary language, questions of translation and authenticity, and styles of orality and literacy. At the end of my account, I return to Appakavi.

I begin with Nannaya, since from at least the sixteenth century he has been repeatedly identified as the first poet in Telugu. The very idea that there should be one first poet in a language that has had more than one literary culture from early on is problematic and obviously stems from a homogenization of Telugu literature in the early-twentieth-century literary histories. In fact, only the poets of the Brahminical courtly tradition recognized Nannaya as the first poet; others, especially those who were aware of their literary culture as distinct and even opposed to the dominant traditions, did not mention his name.

The credit for creating a courtly literary culture, in fact, does clearly belong to Nannaya. Writing a *purāṇa* narrative in *campū* (a Sanskrit-based genre of metrical stanzas interspersed by prose), and the convention of addressing the poem to the patron by making him the listener to the entire narrative, are Nannaya's inventions. The patron's name is evoked at the beginning and the end of each of the chapters, and the context in which the patron commissioned the poem and the family history of the patron are described in some detail. The poet also takes the occasion to describe his own qualifications for composing such a poem. This style of contextualizing the narrative with the speaker and the listener embedded in the text found great favor with the courtly poets of the sixteenth century, who embellished and improved on Nannaya's invention. In the practice of the later courtly poets the patron is called the *kr̥tipati*, the husband of the poem, and the poem itself is called the virgin poem, *kāvyaḥanyā*, who is married to the patron. Even the temple poet Potana adopts this style and addresses his *Bhāgavatamu* to his

god, Rāma, calling him Rāmanṛpāla, King Rāma. The courtly poets used this style to accommodate the social and political aspirations not only of ruling kings but of a range of personalities including heads of the army and treasury, rich merchants, and landowners. The poets described the patron's extended family, including his grandfather, father, uncles, brothers, and their wives, in terms appropriate to the status to which the patron aspired.

Let us see in some detail how Nannaya, at the beginning of his *Mahābhāratamu*, gives a glorious description of the context leading to the composition of the work. The poet describes King Rājarājanarendruḍu, the Veṅgi Cāḷukya king of the eleventh century:

Ravishing as the moon, he alone adorns the class of kings,  
outshines the splendor of other rulers; a true warrior,  
he illumines all worlds like pure moonlight on an autumn night.  
He, Rājanarendra, has put his enemies to rest  
with his indomitable arm—a honed sword—  
as a shower of rain settles dust.<sup>10</sup>

Nannaya also produces a complementary image of himself as a Brahmin family priest, devoted to the king and given to sacrifice and prayer. He is an expert on language (*vipulaśabdaśāsanuḍu*), he is learned in the *purāṇas*, and, most significant of all, he never tells a lie.

Towards the end comes a description of the Sanskrit *Mahābhārata*, which the king loves dearly. It is one of the five things he never gets tired of (the other four are pleasing the Brahmins, worshiping Śiva, keeping the company of good people, and giving gifts). The king wants the *Mahābhārata* to be written in Telugu because, he says:

My lineage begins with the moon, and then proceeds  
through Puru, Bharata, Kuru, and King Pāṇḍu.  
The stories of Pāṇḍu's famous sons, virtuous and beyond blame  
are ever close to my heart.<sup>11</sup>

We can see that the preamble by Nannaya has all the ingredients of a courtly poem: a noble king, a learned poet, and a great text. While it served as a major model in the formation of courtly patronage for literary compositions, Nannaya's text also responds to the way he saw

the Sanskrit *Mahābhārata* of Vyāsa. Introducing Vyāsa's work to his Telugu listeners, Nannaya demonstrates a highly individual understanding of the Sanskrit text. Perceiving it as a work that falls under many descriptions, he writes in the preface to his own *Mahābhārata*:

Those who understand the order of things  
 think it is a book about order.  
 Metaphysicians call it the Vedic system.  
 Counselors read it as a book about conduct.  
 Good poets treat it as a great poem.  
 Grammarians find here usage for every rule.  
 Narrators of the past see it as ancient record.  
 Storytellers know it to be a rich collection of stories.  
 Vyāsa, the first sage, who knew the meaning of all the Vedas,  
 Paraśara's son, equal to Lord Viṣṇu, made the *Mahābhārata*  
 a universal text.<sup>12</sup>

Obviously, Nannaya likewise designed his poem to be all things to his listeners. And the later tradition shows that Nannaya's Telugu text did answer most of the demands made on it. We know that Nannaya was seen as a great poet and that he was regarded as a sage—a combination of Vālmīki and Vyāsa for the Telugu literary tradition. His poem also served as an illustration for all the rules of a grammar which he was supposed to have composed, but which was lost, as noted earlier. In addition, Nannaya was appropriated by later *kāvya* poets as a *kāvya* writer, hence the tribute paid by Rāmarājabhūṣaṇa (a *kāvya* poet himself) in the poem already quoted. All this was possible because there was an organized literary cultural patronage, which continued over centuries, though with significant breaks, and which Appakavi sought to reinvent in his century.

The beginnings of traditions are always authorized as such after the event. That Telugu literature began with Nannaya's *Mahābhāratamu* in the eleventh century has been part of a well-established tradition for several centuries now. But by all the available evidence Nannaya's own intention was only to compose a Telugu work—not to begin anything, let alone a tradition. Even in the thirteenth century Nannaya was not called the first poet. Tikkana, who picked up the Telugu *Mahābhāratamu*

almost where Nannaya had left it a century earlier, pays handsome tribute to his predecessor. He calls Nannaya the master of Telugu poetry (*āndhrakavitvaviśāraduṇḍu*), but stops short of calling him the first poet in Telugu.<sup>13</sup> Apparently, Tikkana knew other Telugu poets who wrote before Nannaya, and if he does not give us their names it could be because he was only interested in the man who had written the first part of the text he himself was to continue.

To Tikkana goes the credit of imagining a Telugu community (*āndhrāvali*) and a strong Brahminical orientation for Telugu elite culture. Tikkana lived an active life. He wrote fifteen volumes to complete the Telugu version of the voluminous Sanskrit *Mahābhārata*; he was adviser and minister to the ruler of a small Telugu king, Manumasiddhi of Nellore; and he was mentor to other Telugu poets who looked up to him for advice and inspiration. Ketana, a student of Tikkana, wrote a grammar of Telugu (*Āndhrabhāṣābhūṣaṇamu*), a *dharmasāstra* work in Telugu (*Vijñāneśvarīyamu*), and a book from the tale (*kathā*) tradition (*Daśakumāracaritramu*). The great kingdom of the Kākatīyas was not too far from where Tikkana worked. However, the Kākatīya kings were busy seeking elevation to the status of Kshatriyas, a service only Sanskrit poets could perform for them. It is not surprising, then, that the beginning of the Telugu canon of Brahminical poetry and the self-conscious orientation of an Andhra literary tradition should start in less powerful Nellore, rather than in the Sanskritized Kākatīya capital of Warangal.

Nannaya produced his *Mahābhāratamu* in the mixed prose-verse *campū* form—a narrative composition with poems in Sanskritic and indigenous meters interspersed with heightened prose (*gadya*). The meters themselves were already in use, as evidenced by the extant fragments in inscriptional and Sanskrit literary sources. What is striking, however, is the extraordinary brilliance shown in his use of the meters and the magical, almost *mantra*-like power achieved in his composition. One is compelled to say that it is Nannaya's talent as a great poet that alone accounts for the recognition he received from later generations; no political, social, or linguistic context could explain this achievement, which established for Telugu a level of poetic excellence it had never had before. The literary for Telugu was determined in favor of

the *campū* primarily because Nannaya created a grand narrative in that genre. The varieties of meter that Nannaya chose—some from Sanskrit sources and others from regional sources—gave his text a dynamism no other texts in either Telugu or Sanskrit offered.

Furthermore, the *campū* was excellently suited for public exposition. In a typical *purāna* performance, a trained performer of the text selects an episode or a section of the narrative, makes an opening statement in his own words, prepares the audience by relating the narrative context, reads one verse or a cluster of verses from the text, and comments on them in his discourse. The *campū* genre, with its mixture of verse and prose, allows the performer to read the verses, then take a break and add his own prose exposition to the narrative, incorporating as he finds appropriate such topical references as would make the discourse interesting to his audience. The structure of the text, in fact, has a built-in role for the performer, without whose improvisation it sounds somewhat incomplete.<sup>14</sup>

In writing *campū*, Nannaya created a genre that presupposes a community of listeners who sit at a distance from the performer and who receive the text as it is delivered to them as part of a public discourse. The text is not immediately intelligible to all listeners. Even to those few people well educated in Sanskritized Telugu it fails to appeal if they try to read it for themselves. It needs an interpreting performer for its very literary existence. This was new in Telugu experience. Until then, there had been only two types of texts—those sung by a group and those sung by an individual. (Apparently all reading was reading aloud.)

Furthermore, Nannaya's style of adapting from Sanskrit established the practice not only of rendering Sanskrit texts into Telugu but making them aesthetically and even ideologically independent of the Sanskrit originals. In this last aspect lies the success of those literary cultures that are generally Sanskritic, that is, the Brahminical, puranic, and courtly cultures. In particular, Nannaya's way of handling meters became a model for all later poets who adopted Sanskritic meters and the *campū* genre. Unlike in a Sanskrit stanza, where words have to end at the end of the line and at the caesura within the line, in Telugu a

word may extend beyond the line and across the caesura. This convention, which Nannaya established, made it possible for Telugu poets to borrow a four-line Sanskrit meter, such as *śārdūla* or *mattebha*, and play with it in a variety of intricate syntactic twists not allowable in Sanskrit.

To illustrate this point, let us look at a couple of verses from Nannaya's *Mahābhārataṃ*, from the episode of the *rājasūya* (royal sacrifice) by Dharmarāja in the Book of the Assembly Hall. Śiśupāla, an enemy of Kṛṣṇa, was upset that Dharmarāja should honor this cowherd at such a glorious event in the presence of all the nobles and kings. Dharmarāja, the eldest of the Pāṇḍava brothers, tries to pacify Śiśupāla with gentle words:

Kṛṣṇa was the very source of the first born, Brahma;  
all the ancient texts sing of him  
and people in all three worlds worship him.  
Bhīṣma knows this and that's why he advised  
that Kṛṣṇa be honored here.  
Listen to me—he is right.<sup>15</sup>

Dharmarāja's sentences, which contain a series of words with long vowels, are slow-moving and drawn out. Even the name he uses for Kṛṣṇa—Dāmōdara—has two long vowels in it. The total effect of the verse is one of thoughtful and non-confrontational explanation. But when all the gentle arguments offered by the senior Dharmarāja in favor of honoring Kṛṣṇa at the sacrifice fail to persuade Śiśupāla to allow the matter to be settled in peace, Sahadeva, the fourth of the five Pāṇḍava brothers, aggressively lifts his foot to crush his opponent and says:

“Yes, we honored Kṛṣṇa,  
and we did so without  
a trace of doubt in our minds.  
You say you don't agree.  
So be it. But if any one of you has a problem with it,  
here is what you get.”  
And he furiously lifted his foot in the assembly.  
Everyone fell silent in total fear.<sup>16</sup>



The line breaks here indicate several short and snappy units. The dominant sound in the first unit is the retroflex *ḍ*, uttered with a plosive force. The next two units have the consonantal clusters *ghya* and *cyu* uttered one after the other, followed in the third and fourth units by identical clusters of *cci*. The short lines express an aggressive, attacking voice, while the long line that follows demonstrates with its breathless frenzy of words the threat that is delivered. The last line collapses into itself with a series of short vowels, almost as if it is afraid of expanding fully—suggesting the fear generated in the assembly by Sahadeva’s show of aggression. This is a poem that is difficult to read slowly—every word chases the preceding word at a breathless speed—until the last line, which is too quiet to be fast. The meaning of the poem is captured in the contours of its sounds.<sup>17</sup>

By using Sanskrit meters in ways that Sanskrit does not use them, and so allowing a large variety of syntactic structures to be contained within the verse, Nannaya gave the Telugu poem a performative richness unparalleled in Sanskrit texts. Nearly every poet after Nannaya followed his style of crafting verses, making Telugu versification an independent art in itself. Furthermore, Nannaya, and more particularly Tikkana, brought to the Telugu *Mahābhāratamu* an atmosphere closer to Telugu domestic life. People in Andhra had long believed that the original Sanskrit text should not be read inside the home or from beginning to end in linear fashion, and that anyone who read it this way would die. The text was felt to generate a disturbing power (*ojas*) that needed to be brought under control through appropriate rituals of pacification.<sup>18</sup> In Nannaya’s measured voice and disciplined diction, and later in Tikkana’s representation of the epic events in Telugu native idiom, the Telugu *Mahābhāratamu* found a wholesome reception as a text that communicated peace and wisdom at home or in assembly or wherever people read it.

This vast transformation did not happen in a day, however. It wasn’t until a hundred years after Nannaya that Tikkana addressed the fact that Nannaya left the Telugu *Mahābhāratamu* incomplete. Moreover, the evidence suggests that not all Telugu poets were ready to accept Nannaya’s experiment in *campū*. With intense vigor, Pāḷkuriki Somanāthuḍu, writing from Śrīśailam in northwestern Andhra in the

thirteenth century, set about producing a text that presented an anti-Brahminical, anti-caste, militant Śaiva ideology.

### The Literary Culture of Śaivabhakti

Śaivabhakti (devotion to Śiva), popularly known as Vīraśaivism or militant Śaivism, was a combative, egalitarian religious movement along the lines of Basaveśvara's twelfth-century teachings in Kannada.<sup>19</sup> Following Basaveśvara's philosophy, Paṇḍitārādhyuḍu and Pāḷkuriki Somanāthuḍu converted people to a religion devoted to Śiva in his form as the mobile *liṅga* (the non-iconic form of Śiva). The adherents to this religion believed that they were reborn when they were initiated to Śaivism. Once reborn, they denied their caste and their birth parents, and believed that every initiate belonged to the same high social status irrespective of previous identity. Vīraśaiva initiates rejected the god in the temple, the king who supported the temples, and the Brahmin priests who served the temples. They carried their own god, the personal Śiva in the *liṅga* form, around their neck.

Somanāthuḍu, who preached an uncompromising and militant form of Vīraśaivism, preferred to use the *dvipada* (lit. two lines) genre, which is composed in two-line metrical units that can continue without any change in meter for as long as the poet chooses. A competent poet using this meter can create a variety of moods with a choice of diction and a change of tone. A *dvipada* text allows a single reader to perform it for a group of listeners, or a group of readers to read it together for themselves; it does not require an interpreting performer. The experience that a *dvipada* reading gives its listeners is immediate, direct, and collective. The text does not create two distinct identities, a reader and a listener; it forces a merger of such identities and creates a community of singer-listeners. Obviously, Nannaya's *campū* form, which presupposes a hierarchy of performer and audience, was structurally unsuited to the egalitarian interests of the Vīraśaiva religion.

Somanāthuḍu knew full well that he was creating a counter-literary culture, one that was opposed to the *campū* both as aesthetic and ideological form. He did not mention Nannaya by name, and therefore we

cannot be certain whether he was responding to Nannaya per se, or contesting a *campū* literary practice that might have been fairly well established by his time. In any case, Somanāthuḍu was determined to strike out on a different path.

In the two major works Somanāthuḍu composed in *dvipada*, the *Basavapurāṇamu* (The Story of Basava) and *Paṇḍitārādhyacaritramu* (Life History of Paṇḍitārādhyuḍu), he offers explanation for his choice of this genre and rejection of *campū*. In the *Basavapurāṇamu* he writes:

Common Telugu is sweet  
and easier  
than those high-sounding compositions  
in prose and verse.  
I will compose *dvipadas*—please do not  
complain they are but  
Telugu. Treat them as the Veda.<sup>20</sup>

Again, in his *Paṇḍitārādhyacaritramu*, Somanāthuḍu expresses his opposition to *campū* texts:

Texts written in prose and verse  
dense with Sanskrit  
are not suited for the people.  
Common Telugu is lucid.

But then he realizes that *campū* has already established its superiority in literature. He wants to compete with it and write *dvipada* that can stand comparison with it:

I will compose *dvipada* equal in power  
to those texts in prose and verse.  
It is no less competent poetry.<sup>21</sup>

Somanāthuḍu not only aims at making a popular Vīraśaiva narrative in *dvipada*; a close look at the metapoetic statements in his *Paṇḍitārādhyacaritramu* gives us a picture of a poet who aims for an alternative poetics, one based on a combination of Daṇḍin's poetics and his own indigenous forms.<sup>22</sup> He intends his composition to function as a *kāvya* according to Daṇḍin's prescription for *mahākāvya*: with all eighteen

descriptive sections, all thirty-six figures of speech, all seventy-two emotional states.

There is not enough historical data for us to ascertain whether Somanāthuḍu succeeded during his time in his attempt to give Telugu literature a new definition. All we know is that *dvipada* remained a parallel tradition to *campū*, and that rarely did the same poet write a *campū* as well as *dvipada* poem. We also know that no other poet controlled *dvipada* meter with the dynamism and vigor, variety and strength, that Somanāthuḍu demonstrated in his *Basavapurāṇamu*. In the hands of lesser poets it tended to be monotonous and repetitive.

As I discuss later, *dvipada* became a kind of second-class literature, practiced mostly by women and less learned, non-Brahmin authors. It gained some recognition at the time of the Nāyaka courts of the seventeenth century, possibly because non-Brahminical poetry re-emerged during this period. But the Brahminical tradition had rejected *dvipada* over the four-century period preceding the Nāyakas. An oft-quoted legend illustrates the Brahminical resistance to *dvipada*. As told by Piduparti Somanāthuḍu (a close follower of Pāḷkuriki Somanāthuḍu, who preferred to rewrite the *Basavapurāṇamu* in *campū*), King Pratāparudra, who ruled over Orugallu (present-day Warangal), noticed a group of Śaiva devotees reading the *Basavapurāṇamu* in a Śiva temple. When he wanted to know more about it, they told him that the sinner Pāḷkuriki Somanāthuḍu had written at length in *dvipada* with poor caesura. This was not standard and indeed had never been done before. Listening to their advice, the king left without paying attention to the reading. Other instances of Brahminical disrespect toward *dvipada* include a statement by an eighteenth-century poet who likened *dvipada* to an old whore (*mudilañja*).<sup>23</sup> Somanāthuḍu's elegant pun on *dvi-pada* (two feet; also, two locations)—it keeps one foot on the earth and the other in heaven, and therefore assures a good position for its readers in both places—was soon forgotten.

Why did *dvipada* lose its status? We might speculate on some of the reasons. Apart from the reported Brahminical opposition, which may indicate loss of royal patronage for *dvipada* but does not fully explain its loss of status, the Vīraśaivas failed to sustain themselves as