

# ANCIENT INDIAN LITERATURE

## AN ANTHOLOGY

VOLUME TWO

CLASSICAL SANSKRIT, PRAKRIT AND APABHRAMSA

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Rabindra Bhavan, 35, Ferozeshah Road, New Delhi 110 001

*Sales Office*

'Swati', Mandir Marg, New Delhi 110 001

*Regional Offices*

Jeevan Tara Bhavan (Fourth Floor)  
23A/44 X, Diamond Harbour Road, Calcutta 700 053

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Dr. B.R. Ambedkar Veedhi, Bangalore 560 001

172, Mumbai Marathi Grantha Sangrahalaya Marg,  
Dadar, Mumbai 400 014

Guna Buildings (Second Floor)  
No. 304-305, Anna Salai  
Teynampet, Chennai 600 018

First Published 2000  
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Price : Rupees Four Hundred and fifty per volume  
Rupees One Thousand and Two Hundred per set of three volumes

ISBN 81-260-0794-X

Website: <http://www.sahitya-akademi.org>



Laser Typeset by Aksharshree and printed at Colourprint, New Delhi 110 032

BURSTAX  
PK  
2903  
A57  
2000g  
vol 2

BURSTAX  
PK  
2903  
A57  
2000g  
v.2

## KĀLIDĀSA : RAGHUVAMŚA

The *Raghuvamśa* or 'Dynasty of Raghu' the magnificent *mahākāvya* or 'verse narrative' of the masterpoet Kālidāsa. It recounts the story of the ruling family of Kosala (in modern Bihar), beginning with Dilīpa, whose son, Raghu, gave his name to the lineage. In chapter seven of Kālidāsa's poem, Raghu's son, Aja, attended the 'self-choice' marriage rite of the princes and Indumatī. She chose him for her husband, and they returned to his home.

### AJA'S LAMENT

1.

The handsome wedding thread was still on Aja's wrist when the King gave into his care the Earth, herself a second Indumatī.

2.

What other princes spare no crime to get Aja received as it came to him—not because of greed but because his father willed it so.

3.

With waters Vasiṣṭha gathered he underwent his rite of consecration, as did his wife the Earth, whose vapours seemed a sigh of contentment.

4.

By the rite of his *guru*, Atharvan master, no enemy could touch him again: the union of Brāhmaṇa with martial power is the union of wind with fire.

5.

To the mind of the people, their new king was Raghu grown young once more, for Aja not only possessed his father's majesty, but his every virtue.

6.

Two things made one with a second equally splendid showed greater splendour: when Aja assumed the ancestral office, and his youth with new-found discipline.

7.

Very gently the powerful king took hold of the new-won earth, like a just-married bride one worries might any moment freeze with fear.

8.

Every last subject thought he alone  
held the king's regard, for like the sea  
with its hundred rivers, he disregarded none.

9.

Neither too hard nor soft, he was like the wind  
in the trees to his enemies; the middle path  
of force he took would make them bend, not break.

10.

With his son established firmly in the realm  
Raghu tamed his spirit and became indifferent  
to all things transient, even the things of heaven.

11.

For Dilipa's descendants, in old age, would pass  
the kingship to virtuous sons, then take the path  
of bark-clad ascetics, strict in self-control.

12.

But just as his father was to leave for the forest  
Aja fell before him, pressed his crowned head  
to his father's feet, and begged him not to forsake him.

13.

And Raghu, for love of his son, acceded  
to the weeping Aja's request; but like a snake  
that sheds its skin, he could never resume the throne.

14.

The last life-stage, they say, he lived outside town.  
Majesty stayed with him still, though she now  
was his son's, and aroused him no more than a daughter-in-law.

15.

The old king at the vanishing-point, and the new  
in the ascendant, made the dynasty resemble  
the sky when the moon departs as the sun is rising.

16.

Bearing the signs of renouncer and king, Raghu  
and son seemed, to all eyes, two portions of *dharmā*—  
transcendence and power—incarnate on earth.

17.

In quest of sovereignty Aja consorted  
with skilled political counselors, and Raghu  
with adept yogins, in quest of the changeless state.

18.

To govern his subjects, the young king took up the seat of justice; the old king took up the seat of sacred grass, to meditate in solitude,

The one subdued all bordering kings by power of lordship, and the other—by devotion to deep thought—subdued the five life-forces within the body.

19.

The new lord turned to ash the works of all his earthly enemies, and the old lord sought to burn his own past acts in the fire of wisdom.

20.

The six elements of politics, peace and the rest, Aja used with an eye to ends; Raghu conquered nature's three elements, looking on gold as dirt.

21.

The new lord would not cease from action before achieving his goal; nor would the old lord cease from *yoga* before beholding the one true Self.

22.

Vigilant toward enemies, or senses, lest either stir once more, both focused themselves—on power, or transcendence—and both reached their goal.

23.

Raghu, empty of feeling, remained some years for Aja's sake—until by meditation he found the immortal Person beyond the dark.

24.

At news of his father's death Rāghava cried for a long while. The final rites of burial he performed, as householder, helped by ascetics.

25.

From devotion he followed the rule, and made death-offerings to his father—though none who take that path in death need a son's gifts of food.

26.

His father was blessed and not to be mourned said those who knew the truth of things. And Aja, at peace, took up the bow and ruled unchallenged.

27.

Both Earth and Indumatī had found a husband of great virility. The one brought forth for him vast treasure, the other a mighty son:

28.

Bright as ten hundred sunbeams, to the ten horizons famed, his name was Daśaratha—'Ten-Chariots.' His son would one day slay Ten-Necked Rāvaṇa.

29.

By study, sacrifice, and sons, the king became free of debt to seers, gods, and ancestors like the sun freed from a carona of mist.

30.

His power was used to ease fear and suffering, his deep learning, to honour the wise—his virtues, not just his wealth, stood at the service of others.

31.

Now, one day, after attending to his subjects, the king strolled with his queen in the city garden like Indra with Sacī in Nandana, garden of the gods.

32.

At the very same moment, by the path the sun takes Nārada came to the banks of the southern sea to serenade the Great God at Gokarṇa.

33.

On the neck of his *vīṇa* there hung a garland strung with unearthly flowers, and—they say—a gust of wind carried it off as if coveting its perfume.

34.

Dark bees drawn by the flowers hovered still around the sage's *vīṇa*, like so many kohl-stained teardrops shed at the outrage of the wind.

35.

With fragrance and nectar more sweet than any vine in full season, the god's wreath came to rest on the full breasts of the king's beloved wife.

36.

The queen glanced down at the wreath that like a friend caressed, for one moment, her rare breasts—and then she blacked out, like the moon's light eclipsed.

37.

She fell, her body numbed, and with her fell  
her husband—for always the last drop of oil  
will fall when the oil flame flickers out.

38.

The attendants of the couple sent up a wild wail  
that terrified the birds on the lotus ponds,  
and the birds cried, too, as if sharing the grief.

39.

They fanned them, and were able to dispel  
the king's darkness, but not the queen's: a remedy  
bears fruit only when some life remains to live.

40.

All but lifeless, like a lute whose strings  
have snapped, the woman he loved so much he drew  
into the embrace she had known so well.

41.

In the pallor of unconsciousness she lay  
slumped in his embrace—and her husband resembled  
the moon at dawn when the man in the moon turns gray.

42.

His inborn composure gone, he began to grieve,  
his throat choking with sobs (if even iron runs  
when heated, how much more the human soul?)

43.

"If, of all things, flowers can touch the limbs  
and take a life, what in the world might not  
become a means for Fate to strike its blow?

44.

"But then, Death's way is using the soft to kill  
the soft—the gentle frost that kills the lotus  
surely offers me example enough.

45.

"If the garland took her life why does it not—  
here on my heart—take mine? Can even poison  
turn to nectar, like nectar to poison, if God wills?

46.

"No, the Lord fashioned a special thunderbolt  
from my bad luck—one that spared the tree  
while cutting down the vine that clung to its branch.

47.

"Whatever wrong I might have done in the past you never slighted me. Why suddenly, now, when innocent, do you refuse to address me?"

48.

"You must have come to think I am a fraud who never truly loved you, to leave for the other world, without a word, never to return.

49.

"Wake up and drive my despair away at once, my love, like those magic herbs that glow at night, driving out the dark of a Himalayan cave.

50.

"Why should this miserable life of mine first follow you, only to return alone? It caused itself deep pain, which now it has to bear.

51.

"Your face is beaded still with drops of sweat from making love with me, yet in spirit you are gone. How inconstant can people be!

52.

"I would not so much as think of wronging you. How then could you leave me? I am 'Husband of Earth' in name alone, for my only love is you.

53.

"The wind tousles your hair, wavy, flower-wreathed, bee-black hair, and for a moment makes me believe that you are coming back to life.

54.

"How painful to see this face, your disheveled hair, the mouth fallen still—a singular lotus, it seems, asleep at night, bees silent in its cup.

55.

"The moon knows night will return, and birds their mates, so can suffer their moments apart. But how can I not burn, knowing you are gone forever?"

56.

"If placed on a bed of fresh petals, your soft body would writhe in pain; how then can it bear, my lovely wife, to mount the funeral pyre?"



57.

"Your closest friend, this belt of bells—motionless and silent as you sleep forever—died, too, did it not, when you died, out of grief?

58.

"In your rush to get to heaven you still thought of me and left your sweet voice behind with the cuckoos, and left the way you walk.

59.

With the geese, and your glances with the deer, your gestures with the wind-stirred vines—but nothing helps my heart weighed down by grief without you.

60.

"This mango-tree and vine you meant to be a couple, and it was wrong of you to leave before seeing them properly joined in marriage.

61.

"The flowers of this *asoka* tree were made to blossom at your touch, to crown your hair. Am I now to make of them your funeral wreath?

62.

"It is perhaps the thought of that rare favour, the touch of your ankleted foot, that makes the *asoka*, the 'grief-less' tree, now grieve with flower-tears.

63.

"How can you sleep, your heavenly voice silent, leaving half-finished the belt of *bakula* flowers—their breath like your breath—that you and I were weaving?

64.

"Girlfriends who share your joy and sorrow, a son like the waxing moon, and I who love no other—yet still you decide to leave, so cruelly stubborn.

65.

"Strength is gone, joy vanished, music silenced, springtime is dead, adornment has lost its charm, and my bed is now forever empty.

66.

"Wife, adviser, friend, and favorite pupil in the secret arts of love—when pitiless death took you from me, what, tell me, did he leave?

67.

"You drank sweet rum from my mouth (those eyes of yours making me drunk!) are you now to drink libations, tear-stained libations, in the other world?"

68.

"Perhaps still king, but hereby ends all joy for Aja, nothing can ever move me again, for all that gave pleasure was all to do with you."

69.

With this sorrowful composition the king of Kosala mourned his wife, and even the trees, branches shedding tears of sap, appeared to mourn.

70.

His kinsmen somehow unlocked the queen from his embrace, performed the final rites, and consigned her to fire of sandal and aloes.

71.

Not any desire to live; just fear of censure ('He was king yet died of grief for a woman') kept him from burning his body with the queen's.

72.

In the grove outside the city the learned king held a sumptuous ten-day's mourning rite for his wife, now but a memory of glory.

73.

He entered the city without her, pale as the moon at the end of night, and in the town's women's tears he could see the overflow of his own sorrow.

74.

Aja's *guru*, during ritual consecration in his *āśrama*, learned in meditation of Aja's grief, and sent a pupil with this message:

75.

"The sage, that master of peace, though knowing of your sorrow, could not come to you himself—his rite still incomplete—to restore your peace of mind.

76.

"But to me he committed some words of advice to give to you, good king: you are famed for inner strength, so listen, and take his words to heart.

77.

"All that is past, and passing, and to come  
in the realms traversed by the Primal Man—all three  
the *guru*'s unclouded eye of wisdom sees.

78.

"Long ago, they say, one Tṛṇabindu  
did penance so severe that Indra took fright  
and sent the nymph Harint to disrupt it.

79.

"Her seductiveness disturbed his penance.  
Like doom his anger crashing on the shores of peace,  
the sage cursed her to be reborn a mortal.

80.

"I acted at another's bidding, Holy One.  
Forgive my crime!' she begged. So he set her term  
on earth to be the day the god's flowers appeared.

81.

"Born in the Krathakaisika clan, she became  
your queen, and at long last found deliverance—  
without her willing it—that fell from heaven.

82.

"So anguish no more at her loss—all those  
that are born must surely perish. Attend to Earth,  
for it is to Earth that kings are truly wedded.

83.

"In good times you showed wisdom, and would shun  
anything worthy of blame. Do so now  
by showing courage in the face of heartbreak.

84.

"Tears will not bring her back; not even death  
can reunite you, for the fates of people diverge  
in the world beyond, by reason of their *karma*.

85.

"Put aside your grieving, and gratify your wife  
with funerary offerings. Tears for kin  
drawn out too long, they say, can burn the dead.

86.

"Death is the natural state, the wise concur,  
and life an accident—to draw a single  
breath upon this earth is great good fortune.

87.

"A lover's death is an arrow piercing the heart for the ignorant man; for the wise, an arrow extracted, an open door to highest bliss.

88.

"When the very body and soul are joined only to be unjoined in an instant, should the wise suffer pain at the loss of fortuitous things?

89.

"Most self-controlled of men, do not fall prey to sorrow like the weak; if mountains swayed in wind, how would they differ at all from trees?"

90.

With a nod of assent Aja heard the advice of his high-minded teacher and dismissed the sage, but the words found no place in his grief-filled heart, and returned, so it seemed, to his *guru's* domain.

91.

Somehow the good and truthful king endured eight years—concerned for his son, then still a child—from the joy of meeting his wife briefly in dreams, from seeing her portrait or other likenesses of her.

92.

But like a figtree-shoot through a plaster wall, the barb of grief had pierced through Aja's heart. Doctors called it hopeless, fatal—yet a blessing for him who only longed to rejoin his love.

93.

The prince, when trained and old enough to fight, was duly appointed king, and Aja resolved on death by starvation to leave the hovel of his pain-racked body.

94.

Where Gaṅgā and Sarayū mix their waters—at that holy spot he gave up his body and at once was enrolled in the list of immortals. Reunited with his wife more radiant than ever, he passed his time in hideaways in Nandana, garden of the gods.

*Translated by Sheldon Pollock*

## NOTES

The edition used for this translation is that edited by Reva Prasada Dwivedi, Sahitya Akademi,

1993.

st. 3 'Vasiṣṭha': The family priest of the Raghu clan.

st. 4 'Atharvan': Relating to the fourth Veda, one with special associations with royal power.

st. 14 'life-stage': Twice-born males are expected to pass successively through the stage of studentship, household, and renunciant.

st. 21 'element': *guṇa*, in the case of politics, refers to peace, war, expedition, inaction (or halting), seeking alliance (or shelter), ambiguity or duplicity; in the case of nature, to the psychophysical categories known as *sattva*, *rajas* and *tamas*.

st. 25 'of burial': Rather than cremation, since his father had become an ascetic, and ascetics are buried.

st. 29 'His son would one day slay Ten-Necked Rāvaṇa': The reference is to Rāma, whose slaying of Rāvaṇa is recounted in chapter twelve of the poem.

st. 33 'Gokaṛṇa': An important pilgrimage site on the north Karnataka coast.