

DAVID PIERDOMINICI LEÃO

THE KAVI AS A WARRIOR:
THE POETIC FIGHT BETWEEN ARUṆAGIRINĀTHA
DIṆḌIMA AND ŚRĪNĀTHA AS AN IMAGE OF
LITERARY CHANGES IN 15TH CENTURY
VIJAYANAGARA¹

During the reign of the Vijayanagara emperor Devarāya II (1422-1446), in an unspecified date, a singular and almost unknown literary duel took place between two outstanding poets of the 15th century South India, Aruṇagirinātha, the most famous member of the Diṇḍima clan, and the Telugu author Śrīnātha.

About Aruṇagiri and, more generally, the Diṇḍimas, we have many informations, which come from a very late work in Sanskrit, the *Vibhāgaratnamālikā*,² which diffusely deals with the origin of this family but reveals several discrepancies, especially from the chronological point of view. It is said that eight *brahmanas*, belonging to different *gotras*, went to South India from the Gangetic valley under invitation of a king, supposedly Gaṅgaikoṇḍa Rajendra Cōla (1014-1044), and were honored with the gift of a village, the so-called Rājanāthapura. At the age of the emperor Bukka I (1356-1377) other ten families emigrated and settled in the Attiyūr village. The most

¹This paper, presented during the International Seminar "Patterns of Bravery. The Figure of the Hero in Indian Literature, Arts and Thought", 2015 May 14th-16th, constitutes for many aspects a work in progress, being a small point connected with my PhD research topic, the critical edition of the *Somavallīyogānandaprahasana* of Aruṇagirinātha.

²Gopinatha Rao 1918: 94-100; for the edited text 125-131.

important member of the clan was definitely Aruṇagirinātha – whose family details and ancestry are given in the prologue of his *Somavallīyogānandaprahasana*³ – the hero of a local chronicle and court poet of Devarāya, who gave him the title of *sārvabhaumakavi* and a village, Mullaṇḍram or Diṇḍimālayam, named after him. His importance and prestige are witnessed by an inscription of the Svayambhūnātheśvara temple at Mullaṇḍram and a hint in the *Sāḷuvābhyudaya* of Rājanātha, who reports a list of eighteen *birudas* (epithets) of his father Aruṇagirinātha (Sudyka 2013: 130). Diṇḍima is credited with the authorship of four works: aside from the already mentioned *prahasana*, the *mahākāvya Rāmābhyudaya*⁴ and the *Prakāśikā* commentaries on Kālidāsa's *Raghuvamśa* and *Kumārasambhava* (Gaṇapati Sāstrī 1913-1914).

Śrīnātha was the great Telugu poet who was patronized by the Kōṇḍavīḍu Rēḍḍis, the Vēlamas of Rācakōṇḍa and the Vijayanagara empire (Narayana Rao – Shulman 2012); his most famous accomplishment is the *Śrīṅgāranaiśadhamu*, the Telugu translation of the tricky Śrīhara's *mahākāvya*, the *Naiśadhīya-carita*.

The oral tradition of the Āndhra land – concerning in particular Śrīnātha's biography – tells us a story about this poetic fight, giving also the historical frame of the duel. It is said that Śrīnātha arrived at the court of Devarāya, from his native country, in a mood to challenge the royal scholars and the court poet of the time, Diṇḍima, who proudly carried the emphatic title of *kavisārvabhauma* and a drum to announce his approach.

The *cāṭu* tradition⁵ has handed down two impromptus which are supposed to be pronounced by the poets during the fight at the presence of the sovereign and the scholar judges; the one by Śrīnātha reads as follows:

³ Triennial cat. of Sanskrit Manuscripts in Oriental Library, Madras vol.II 2276.

⁴ Visalakshy 2003; about the authorship problems see Visalakshy 2003: 9-10 and Sudyka 2013: 131.

⁵ *Cāṭu* in Sanskrit means “pleasing or graceful words or discourse, flattery”; exists a traditional oral heritage of verses pronounced by illustrious poets in specific occasions, which come under the definition of “*cāṭu* tradition”.

“I’ll put on my armor to fight with any poet
 who walks the earth boastfully.
 I’ll lift my foot to kick the head of any poet
 who makes mistakes in language.
 I’ll break the mouth of any poet who shines in the
 assembly
 just because he can read and speak.
 I’ll torment anybody, no matter how strong he is.
 If you enjoy a good fight among poets,
 godlike King Praudharāya,
 just invite me to your court.”⁶

Aruṇagiri is also credited with a confident *śārdūlavikrīḍita* verse in Sanskrit, in response:

*agre diṇḍimatāḍanaṃ tata ito vandivrajodghoṣaṇam
 dvitras citrapaṭāḥ kiyanti birudaprotāni padyāni naḥ |
 āstāṃ tāvad idam maheśamakuṭīkoṭīrakallolinī-
 kallolapratimallasūktivibhavair dveṣyān vijeṣyāmahe ||*

“In front, the drum is beating.
 Next, a whole flock of heralds,
 singing my praises.
 Then, two or three paintings,
 and the poems that announce my titles.
 But more important, with the powerful flow of my verses
 that can drown even the waves of the Ganges
 pouring down from Śiva’s crown,
 I’ll crush all enemies.”⁷

After these high aggressive verses, a pyrotechnic contest among the two poets started; at the end, the royal guru, Candrabhūṣakriyāśaktirāyalu, pronounced Śrīnātha the winner: the Telugu poet had Diṇḍima’s drum smashed and took over the titles as *kavisārvabhauma*, becoming the new Devarāya’s court poet (Narayana Rao – Shulman 2012: 155).

⁶ Narayana Rao – Shulman 2012: 154; for *cāṭu* verses about Śrīnātha’s visit to Vijayanagara see Krishnaswami Aiyangar 1919: 61-62.

⁷ Narayana Rao – Shulman 2012: 154; for the Sanskrit text Arudra 2002: vol.I, 719.

The historicity of this event can't be denied, because we know very well from literary tradition and details about the Diṇḍimas that Aruṇagirinātha was Devarāya's court poet and was beaten by Śrīnātha, who, in the later stage of his life, bore the title of *kavisārvabhauma*, as we hear from the colophon of *Kāśīkhaṇḍamu*.

Aside from the specific details, this poetic fight doesn't represent any new brand: it can be easily inserted in the long tradition of literary disputes, like those which have been held in the *paṇḍitasabhās* and *kāvyaagoṣṭhīs* for centuries. These elements were obviously the means through which poets could earn money, fame among literary *connoisseurs*, the royal patronage and a permanent position, for example as court poet.⁸ As it is known, the *kavi* was influenced by a strong spirit of competition, "by a constant endeavour to improve his work and to surpass his rivals. He found confirmation of his worth not only when reading the works of his contemporaries and of the great writers of the past but also in discussion, challenges and open contests" (Lienhard 1984: 16). We know about the existence of many societies, frequently connected with the court life, which were established by kings and princes and in which poets could demonstrate their poetic gifts and abilities.⁹ Moreover, these contests were held also in specific open-air meetings (*samāja*) or courtly ones (*sabhā*), arranged for the *kavis* and learned men¹⁰ at which the participants were requested to give readings of their works, improvise verses on a given theme (*samasyāpūraṇa*) and solve literary riddles and verses puzzles. The poet who emerged victorious from the contests showing his poetic skill and knowledge could earn a very rich reward, "money and possessions, a fine title and an enhanced reputation. If he were a stranger, the king might

⁸ Lienhard 1984: 16-18; paradigmatic in this sense are the case of the *vidyācakravartins*, court poets of the Hoysāla dynasty, and the final verses of the *Pavanadūta* of Dhoyī.

⁹ Many of these private or public debates were also subdivided in specific fields: *kāvyaagoṣṭhīs* for classical poetry, *jalpagoṣṭhīs* for itihāsa and purāṇas, *nrtyagoṣṭhīs* for dancing and *vādya/vīṇāgoṣṭhīs* for instrumental music (Lienhard 1984: 16).

¹⁰ As it is pointed out in Lienhard 1984: 16, not only poets or those learned in *kāvya*, but also sculptors, painters, jewellers, actors and courtesans.

persuade him to stay on, or even attempt to get him to join his own court” (Lienhard 1984: 17). Obviously the attendance to this kind of meetings under the royal patronage was an essential part of the poetic activity, especially for those *kavis* who had economic trouble and desired a career’s advance. Indian kings and aristocracy in general were very fond of surrounding themselves with poets, *in primis* because their presence could give fame and prestige to the court:¹¹ poets normally glorified their patrons in a variety of different compositions (*mahākāvya*s, *praśastis*, *caritas*) in exchange of protection and maintenance. Moreover, poets were indispensable to monarchs, “since documents, inscriptions of all kinds, deeds of gift etc. were usually left to the poet to compose, as the high-flown diction and the artistic style often show” (Lienhard 1984: 17).¹² Actually, sometimes the *kavis* occupied a preeminent position at courts, for example as advisers of their kings or with other political functions.

In my opinion, in addition to this traditional frame, the prominence of the meaning of this poetic fight can reside also in the particular literary and social perspectives this event could be analyzed with and in many elements which will be illustrated in the course of the paper.

As a political entity which covered many areas of the south indian territory, Vijayanagara was an empire in which the multilingualism was one of the essential features: we can observe not only a high literary activity, but also an epigraphic tradition in which the Sanskrit, Telugu, Tamil and Kannada linguistic realities were witnessed. In particular, as pointed out by Sheldon Pollock (Pollock 2001: 401), the Sanskrit culture in the City of Victory shows many paradoxes: an exhaustion of the literary creativity and a great improvement of the scholarship.¹³

¹¹ This is the case, for example, of Vikramāditya of Ujjain, who patronized a large staff of poets, the so-called *Navaratna*, of Harṣadeva of Kanauj (606-647) and Lakṣmaṇasena of Bengal (1179-1205).

¹² On this point see Pollock 2006: 115-161.

¹³ To the first dynasty of the Vijayanagara empire, the Sangama (1336-1485), is attributable the great commenting work on the *Veda*, the *Vedārthaprakāśa*, started by Sāyaṇa (...-1387) and Mādhava, ministers of Harihara I (1336-1357) and Bukka I (1344-

The Sanskrit and its cultivation continued to be taken as a state and imperial enterprise, but, literary speaking, nothing original was produced: very few works written during those centuries continued to be read beyond the time of their composition and very few were commented. Many works were lost during the Vijayanagara's havoc in 1565, but the major part of the texts written by the great court poets are preserved – though not much attention and studies have been devoted to them by the scholarship.¹⁴ Almost all these encomiastic works belonged to *mahākāvya/sargabandha*'s traditional genre, a highly “worn-out” form of *kāvya* at that time.

The real literary energies were directed towards the vernacular productions, mainly those in Telugu and Tamil: paradoxically, although Vijayanagara was an empire of *karnāṭa* foundation, at courts the kannada production was very little sponsored; on the contrary, outside the courtly reality, the poetry in kannada will be greatly developed during the XV-XVII centuries by the Mādhva religious order's exponents, like Pūrandaradāsa and Kanakadāsa (Pollock 2001: 401). About this point, we can easily remember the contrast about the courtly Bhārata in Sanskrit by Divākara at Kṛṣṇadevarāya's court, which remained unread and unrecopied, with the “non-courtly” one in kannada by Kumāravṃśa, which is handed down by the textual tradition in about 150 manuscripts. This work, dated to the XV century, was completed by Timmaṅṅakavi, a kannada poet who resided at Kṛṣṇarāya's court; this completion represented, actually, his only accomplishment (Pollock 2001: 401).

What is more, the dynamics and the influence of the religious traditions on the development of the vernacular production cannot be ignored and underestimated. The *vīraśaiva*

1377), with later additions of their disciples. During Devarāra II's reign Sāluva Goppa Tippala Bhūpala commented on Vāmana's literary treatise; the commentary on the *campū Bhārata* of Ananta by Sāluva Timmappa and Lolla Lakṣmīharadeśika's works belong to Kṛṣṇadevarāya's times.

¹⁴ Beside the *Rāmābhyudaya*, the *Madhuravijaya* of Gaṅgādevī, the *Sāluvābhyudaya* of Rājanātha Diṇḍima, son of Aruṅagirinātha, and the *Acyutarāyābhyudaya* of Rājanātha II are preserved.

movement, which exerted a large influence in the later Sangama age, played a great role in the improvement of the telugu production; and with the accession to the throne of the Sāḷuva and, later, of the Tuluva dynasts in the XV-XVI centuries, the *vaiṣṇava* current, becoming the official and imperial cult, represented the principal religious background of the Tamil country, deeply connected with the major religious centers of the area, like Śrīraṅgam, Tirumalai and Kāñcī.¹⁵

As pointed out always by Pollock, another feature of the Sanskrit literary production in Vijayanagara, especially in the XVI century, can be analyzed looking at a work composed by Kṛṣṇadevarāya himself, the *Jāmbavatīpariṇaya* (Pollock 2001: 402-403), a drama written and represented at court during the spring festival of god Virūpākṣa. The plot, drawn out from a little episode of the *Bhāgavatapurāṇa*, tells the story of the marriage between Kṛṣṇa and Jāmbavatī, daughter of the Bear king Jāmbavān, and the recover of a magic gem. Anyway, also this work represents nothing new, from literary dynamic's point of view: besides the episode already treated (the *Jāmbavatīvijaya* attributed to Pāṇini), the dramatic technique and the language clearly shows the influence of the ancient tradition rather than authentic and original solutions. But this text has considerable importance because not only presents many details concerning the Vijayanagara court but, also, for the choice of Sanskrit. The *Jāmbavatīpariṇaya* is not composed in the classical language due to religious-mythological reasons: by the XVI century the vernacular language, as shown before, will ascend as the vehicle of the religious experience. The work is written in Sanskrit because the language is now the incarnation of the political narrative in the Vijayanagara empire. The drama shows many details connected with the court – its characters, the audience and its way of reception of Sanskrit literature, for example –, but are details no more accessible to us, due to their deep and intrinsic connection with the particular historical

¹⁵ For a complete overview about religious situation in the Vijayanagara empire see Verghese 1995, in particular 16-33 for the *śaivite* traditions and 34-84 for a full account of the *vaiṣṇaiva* cults.

moment. As Sheldon Pollock shows (Pollock 2001: 403), aesthetic in the Vijayanagara literature is highly historical-political: works composed during this particular moment are really the expression of the imperial ideology and its changes. Like Kṛṣṇadevarāya's work, also other productions of the courtly poets are deeply connected with this point: indeed, they are mainly *caritas*, *vijayas*, *abhyudayas*, traditional and "exhausted" genres from the literary point of view. With political upheavals, these works, literary expression of the imperial power and its culture, loosed their connection with their historical meanings and were not anymore read.

On this point, for example, the *Rāmābhyudaya* of Aruṇagirinātha is a great *praśasti* of the Sāḷuva dynasty and a retelling of the *Rāmāyaṇa* story, in which the political and literary threads are connected by the identification of the new usurper Narasiṃha¹⁶ with the figure of Viṣṇu/Rāma. Besides, this work is a traditional *mahākāvya* characterized by a slender narrative thread, abundance of descriptions and the canonical stylistic virtuosity, as it can be considered the XIX *sarga*, an explanation of the different types of *yamakas*. Remained no more read or commented during centuries, the only and recent critical edition of the *Rāmābhyudaya*, based on a transcription in very dilapidated condition of a single manuscript, is dated to 2003. Also the *Somavallīyogānanda* of Diṇḍima had the same fate. Maybe it was represented at Devarāya II's court, at the presence of the king and the audience for their amusement, but, later, it was not read anymore: the most clear symptom of this situation is given by the manuscript state of the work.

The Sanskrit tradition could not be exclusive at the courts of the emperors who aspired to a political, social and cultural prominence; the vernacular realities needed indeed to be considered and sponsored, not only from the literary point of view, but also and mainly for political reasons. The choice operated by Kṛṣṇarāya for example to write his *Āmuktamālyada*

¹⁶ Sāḷuva Narasiṃha (1486-1491) encroached the throne and started the second dynasty of the Vijayanagara empire (1486-1505), deposing the parricide Praudharāya (1485), son of Virūpākṣa II (1465-1485).

in Telugu is not accidental or neglectable; in *Āmuk.* I, 15 we read:

“If you ask, “Why Telugu?”
It is because this is Telugu country and I am a Telugu
king.
Telugu is one of a kind.
After speaking with all the kings that serve you, didn’t
you realize -
amongst all the regional languages, Telugu is the best!”¹⁷

The king was trying to gratify the Telugu elites and to obtain military and political support from the ruling chieftains of the Āndhra area, saying that Telugu language is the best among regional or *deśī* languages.

In this way, the vernacular literary production arose to prominence in the cultural patronage operated by the Vijayanagara rulers. It is fundamental to note the background difference between poets in Sanskrit and the ones in Tamil or Telugu: the latter, being highly advantaged due to natural knowledge of their mother-tongue, were deep knowers of the Sanskrit tradition (in particular the language of the *kāvya*, epic, *purāṇa* and *alaṅkāraśāstra*), which permitted them to benefit at the same time of their regional milieu and the pan-indian Sanskrit tradition. The Telugu poetry of Śrīnātha, with its characters of innovation and strangeness, was a deep sanskritized poetry, in which the presence of the classical tradition, like style, device, motives, was clearly perceptible. This evidence doesn’t show that Sanskrit was no more important in Vijayanagara culture, but simply it was not adaptable anymore with the dynamic and polyhedral world of the empire, a world culturally faceted. The Sanskrit tradition could not be more socially, literarily and politically compatible as the only funding paradigm with the empire’s heterogeneous

¹⁷ I retrieve the English translation from Reddy 2010: 5, the only translation accessible to me.

reality, which could be considered as an extraordinary receptacle of very different influences.¹⁸

Maybe the poetic fight between Aruṇagirinātha Diṇḍima and Śrīnātha could be considered as a kind of symbolic representation of this particular literary situation in the Vijayanagara empire: a fight between the regional tradition and the Sanskrit one incarnated by the Diṇḍimas, which, from a leading position, contended with the recent and rising production in vernacular. The aggressive lexicon reflects also the changes in the position of the *literatus* in the XIV-XV century South India: the poet became a wandering figure, always travelling from court to court in search of stability and patronage and fighting with other poets for the supremacy (Narayana Rao – Shulman 2012: 156). The character and activity of the poet became so a hypostasis of the imperial power: it's enough to observe the similarity among the poetic and imperial titling, *kavisārvabhauma/sārvabhauma*.

This poetic fight can truly be considered as a real and authentic fight between two heroic warriors, who struggle and defend themselves with the arms of poetry, wit and knowledge for their prominence (as it is clear from Śrīnātha's verse), like the Vijayanagara empire fought against the Muslim reigns for its supremacy and survival. By the end, in the Vijayanagara reality the pan-indian tradition of Sanskrit is defeated by the vernacular one, like Diṇḍima by Śrīnātha. Maybe the strong image of the smash of Aruṇagiri's drum, an object which expresses not only the literary authority of its owner but it is also connected with a warlike dimension, can express symbolically this circumstance. The "victory" of the vernacular languages will contribute to determine what Sheldon Pollock calls "the dying status of Sanskrit in Vijayanagara".¹⁹

¹⁸ Illuminating in this sense are Wagoner 1996 and 1999, in which the author, starting from considerations connected with political and social datas, artistic elements and dress modes, illustrates the influences and the great transcultural dynamics of the Vijayanagara empire.

¹⁹ Pollock 2001: 403-404; although the sociological and literary analysis carried out by Sheldon Pollock can be considered more exhaustive than in other parts of his paper, I think that this definition of the "death of Sanskrit" could be misunderstood. In Vijayanagara the

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Sanskrit tradition was not moribund or lost its importance; it was affected by the rising importance of the vernacular productions, but continued to occupy a great role in the cultural and literary *milieu* of the empire, handing down later on its heritage to the Nāyaka era. In particular, Pollock’s statement that in Vijayanagara Sanskrit was dying “as a mode of personal expression, a vehicle of human experience away from imperial stage” (Pollock 2001: 403-404) counters with the clear evidence that “personal expression is not a strong point in *kāvya*”, as pointed out in Hanneder 2002: 307. The importance of Sanskrit during this period, despite of all the changes, is witnessed by the great importance itself of the Diṇḍima family, a courtly poetic clan that served the reign celebrating its culture and power since the beginning of the Vijayanagara empire till the Tuluva dynasty. I think that “death of Sanskrit” speaking is vaguely peremptory. For the scholarly debate originated by Pollock’s paper see obviously Hanneder 2002 and also Kaviraj 2005.

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