KUMARAVYASA
THE KANNADA MAHABHARATA
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INTRODUCTION

The Kannada Mahabharata, formally titled Karṇāṭa Bhārata Kathā Maṇjari (A Bouquet of Mahabharata Stories in Kannada), is a celebrated fifteenth-century poetic recreation by Kumaravyasa of India’s great epic the Mahābhārata in Kannada, one of India’s major literary languages. This work is popularly known as Kumāravyāsa Bhārata, Kannāḍa Bhārata, or Gadugina Bhārata (The Bharata from Gadugu), referring to modern Gadag, a town in northern Karnataka.

The Mahābhārata, an ancient Sanskrit poem and one of the foundational texts of Indian culture, took its present form sometime in the early centuries of the Common Era. Traditionally, it is believed to have been composed by Vyasa, the legendary compiler of the four sacred Vedas and the eighteen Puranas—and a character in the Mahabharata story. It deals with the rivalry between two branches of a royal family, the five Pandava brothers and the one hundred Kauravas, and culminates in a cataclysmic war. Consisting of about 100,000 verses in eighteen books, it is likely the longest poem ever written, and it explores an enormous range of human characters as they face daunting challenges and profound moral dilemmas. The Mahābhārata has inspired innumerable adaptations in virtually every artistic medium, form, and language of India. Kumaravyasa’s epic is a supreme example of a dramatic adaptation of the story in a major regional language.
Even though it is a “re-creation” (kathāntara), _The Kannada Mahabharata_ deserves its place in the pantheon of Indian and, indeed, world literary classics. Kumaravyasa is a master storyteller. He offers remarkable insights into human nature and behavior in elegantly crafted situations and grand confrontations between mortals and deities. His crowded canvas teems with memorable characters, portraying their frailties and obsessions, valor and villainy, devotion and defiance—with the magnificently conceived character of Krishna at the center. Kumaravyasa selects those parts of the gigantic epic that have universal interest and lend themselves to dramatic treatment, leaving out numerous subsidiary tales and didactic portions. His poetic idiom has an enormous range, from the sublime to the colloquial, as well as a creative blend of classical Sanskrit and vernacular Kannada, laced with a profusion of bold, brilliant, and original metaphors. His sensitive and complex treatment of the plight of women in patriarchal society, his pointed criticisms of abuse of power and privilege as well as the politics of the establishment, his questioning of the value of war, his depictions of the confrontation between ego and humility, and his representations of the limits of hubris resonate for all times.

_Life and Work_

Little is known of Kumaravyasa. As is not unusual in classical Indian literature, there is almost no reference to the poet’s identity or details of his life and times in the work. Whatever we know of him is based on folklore and inferences from the
work itself. Even “Kumaravyasa,” which could mean either “little Vyasa” or “protégé of Vyasa,” is a pen name. This tells us as much about his own modesty as about his reverence for Vyasa. He calls himself a mere scribe (lipikāra)—the real poet being his patron god, Viranarayana, a manifestation of Vishnu and the presiding deity of the temple by that name in Gadugu. According to legend, Kumaravyasa composed his epic in this temple sitting against a pillar, which is still shown to visitors. He displays his devotion to the god in the final verse of each chapter (sandhi), which contains a cleverly woven reference to Viranarayana (“Valiant Narayana”), who is identified with Krishna. However, Kumaravyasa’s pen name also indicates self-confidence as a poet in the great tradition of Vyasa. At the end of each book, there is a prose colophon that appends the title yogindra (supreme yogi) to the author’s name.

An inscription in the temple says that the Vijayanagara king Achyutaraya made an endowment to Kumaravyasa’s chosen deity on a date corresponding to August 26, 1539. Furthermore, Thimmanna Kavi, the court poet of King Krishnadevaraya (r. 1509–1529), states that, at the king’s order, he composed the last eight books of the Mahābhārata that Kumaravyasa left out. Assuming a few decades’ interval for the poem to have attained an iconic status, we can surmise that Kumaravyasa’s work may have been composed prior to 1500. Most scholars are of the opinion that Kumaravyasa lived around the fourteenth and fifteenth century and must have composed his epic around 1400.

It is generally believed that Kumaravyasa’s real name was Naranappa. He must have been named after Viranarayana.
He is believed to have been a kāraṇika or shānubhoga (village accountant) by profession, since his descendants—who still live in the village of Kolivada, a few miles from Gadugu—pursue that hereditary profession.

Earlier scholarship on Kumaravyasa was preoccupied with his sectarian affiliation, whether he was a Shaiva (in particular an Advaitin, or nondualist devotee of Shiva) or a Vaishnava (especially a Dvaitin, or dualist devotee of Vishnu). As with great authors like Shakespeare, the author’s personal ideology cannot be inferred from his work because the characters express very different opinions, often contradicting one another. While the author’s excitement and exuberance are evident whenever Krishna, the central character, enters the scene, Kumaravyasa also celebrates Shiva in the famous dramatic confrontation between the god and the hero Arjuna. Furthermore, his characters constantly exclaim Shiva Shivā, Hara Harā, or Mahādēvā! (roughly equivalent to “My God!”). The work itself seems to allow both. This pluralism seems to be in line with the author’s tendency to attribute all opinions to characters or narrators.

Clearly, Kumaravyasa was a Brahman, well-acquainted with the Vedas, the Upanishads, the Puranas, and the epics, as well as the great works of Sanskrit poetry and drama. Several episodes reflect the influence of Sanskrit classics such as Bhattanarayana’s Veṇīsaṃhāra (The Braiding of the Hair of Draupadi), Bharavi’s Kirātārjunīyam (Arjuna and the Hunter), Magha’s Śiśupālavadha (The Killing of Shishupala), Bhasa’s Dūtavākyam (The Message of the Ambassador), and others.
Kumaravyasa also shows an intimate knowledge of the colossus of Kannada literature, Pampa, as well as Ranna (both tenth century), his predecessors in retelling the Mahabharata. There are points where he follows their versions, but in many other parts he sets them aside and restores Vyasa’s version. In one crucial respect Kumaravyasa and Pampa differ. Unlike Pampa, Kumaravyasa did not enjoy any royal patronage. This circumstance allows him freedom to follow Vyasa’s story line and avoid the awkward traps that Pampa falls into as he renders his epic, *Vikramārjunavijayam* (Victory of the Valiant Arjuna), an allegory of his patron’s royal power. Pampa’s Jaina affiliation also inhibits him from glorifying Krishna, whom he depicts only as a great human but not a divine figure. For Kumaravyasa, by contrast, Krishna is the grand puppeteer of human actions, including within his epic. As for Ranna’s work, it deals only with the final, crucial episode of the Mahabharata, “the battle of the maces” (*gadāyuddha*) between Bhima and Duryodhana, although he does recapitulate the highpoints of the story using a flash-back technique.

Although not affiliated with any king, Kumaravyasa did possess an intimate knowledge of royal life and etiquette as well as myriad details of warfare. His descriptions of the various types of officials, palace intrigues, courtly entertainment, the behavior of security guards, the deferential demeanor of courtiers, and the like could not have been written by someone unfamiliar with royalty. His description of the injuries suffered by soldiers in battle, the details of medical aid, and the behavior of
war elephants shows his insider’s knowledge of military campaigns.

The fact that Kumaravyasa did not write for a royal patron also gives him freedom to satirize the ways of the royalty and the warrior class, the Kshatriyas. He misses no opportunity to criticize their addiction to sports, sensual pleasures, and womanizing; reliance on physical force to solve differences; glorification of martial skills; and expansionist tendencies. He is also sharply critical of courtiers’ deference, conformity, and silence at moments of moral crisis.

Kumaravyasa, though a Brahman, does not hesitate to satirize the priestly class whenever he sees greed, gluttony, pusillanimity, a sense of entitlement, and willingness to find specious arguments to support either side.

It is also clear that Kumaravyasa was rooted in village life, folk culture, and rural mores and speech patterns. He weaves this knowledge into his descriptions of situations and characters, human and divine alike, and their dialogues and mannerisms, which makes them down-to-earth and believable.

In chapter 1, a prologue to his epic, Kumaravyasa claims a number of distinctions that throw light on his background. One is “the distinction of not holding a tablet or chalk” (halage baḷapava pidiyadondaggaḷike), which has been interpreted as not having had formal schooling. This claim is belied by the fact that he effortlessly incorporates the gist of numerous learned texts; his treatment of episodes is colored by that of great writers; and he employs by far the richest vocabulary of any Kannada author. It is, therefore, better interpreted as referring to not following the common
practice of composing a draft on a slate before carving it with a stylus on palm leaves.

He goes on to list other distinctions: not erasing a word once written; not slavishly accepting other writers’ practices; and not pausing with the stylus while writing. These are in character with his independent temperament and the smooth flow of his narrative.

Reimagining the Mahābhārata
Kumaravyasa’s attitude to Vyasa’s original Mahābhārata is both reverential and innovative. He follows Vyasa faithfully on many occasions but departs from him frequently in the interests of his own literary design.

Kumaravyasa’s The Kannada Mahabharata is less than one-fourth as long as the original—he condenses the work from about 100,000 ślokas (verses) in eighteen books to about 8,200 six-line stanzas in ten books. He eliminates the last eight books, including the famous discourse on politics and ethics by the paterfamilias Bhishma, ending his version with the coronation of Yudhishthira and the passing of Krishna. He omits a number of subsidiary episodes (upākhyānas) and compresses others, for example: the story of Bhishma’s sacrifice for his father; the story of Amba’s vow to avenge her abduction and Bhishma’s refusal to marry her; and, famously, the spiritual classic of Hinduism, Bhagavadgītā, which he renders in 55 stanzas as opposed to the 700 verses of the original. He also controversially condenses the story of the tribal archer Ekalavya, which has exposed him to severe criticism (see below).
Kumaravyasa’s departures from Vyasa do not always lead to compression. He often introduces new elements that augment character. For example, the redoubtable Duryodhana, a Kaurava prince and sworn antagonist of the Pandavas, expresses his ambivalence toward Krishna. Or when Vidura, his uncle and a paragon of moral rectitude, breaks his bow in anger over Duryodhana’s insulting behavior toward Krishna in Book Five. On some occasions Kumaravyasa elaborates on ideas hinted at by Vyasa to provide better motivation for ensuing actions and insights into character. Kumaravyasa depicts Duryodhana’s humiliation and thirst for revenge after being ridiculed by the Pandava queen Draupadi and her maids during Yudhishthira’s royal sacrifice as the prince’s main excuse for manipulating his father to call the Pandavas to a game of dice—and to then publicly disrobe Draupadi. Krishna pressing his toe on the ground to make the insolent Duryodhana tumble to his feet is also not in Vyasa (though there is a reference to it in Bhasa’s Dūtavākyam). In a battle scene, the Pandava Arjuna’s inexplicable feeling of fraternal pity and his hesitation to kill Karna, actually his unidentified half brother, is more sensitively presented in Kumaravyasa than in Vyasa. The Pandava brother Bhima’s gruesome killing of his Kaurava cousin Duhshasana is another elaboration that aptly foregrounds the fulfilment of his oath to avenge the latter’s public humiliation of Draupadi. Some other elaborations provide occasions for hilarity—for example, the extended description of Draupadi’s wedding and the celebrated humorous treatment of Prince Uttara’s empty boasts of chivalry. Thus, Kumaravyasa’s retelling is not just
BOOK ONE

The Book of Beginnings
ಅನುವಾದ

ಜನರ್ ಗದುಗಿನ ವಿರೀರನಾರಯಣ

ಶ್ರೀರ್ನಿತೆಯರಸನೆ ವಿಮಲ ರಾ
ಜರೀರ್ಪರೀಥನ ಪತನೆ ಜಗಕತಿ
ಪಾರ್ನನೆ ಸನಕಾದಿ ಸಜ್ಜನಿಕರದಾತಾರ
ರಾರ್ಣಾಸುಮಠನ ಶ್ರರ್ಣ ಸುಧಾ ವಿನೂತನಕಥನಕಾರಣ
ಕಾವುದಾನತ ಜಾರಿ ಗದುಗಿನ ವಿರೀರನಾರಯಣ

ಭರಣನಮರಕಿರರೀಟಮಂಡಿತ
ಚರಣ ಚಾರುಚರತ್ರ ನಿರುಪಮ ಭಾಳಶಿಖಿನೆರೀತ್ರ
ಕರಣನಿಮ್ವಲ ಭಜಕರಘಸಂ
ಹರಣ ದಂತಿ ಚಮೂರ್ವಂಬರನೆ ಸಲಹುಗೆ ಭಕುತಜನರನು ಪಾರ್ವತಿರೀರಮಣ

ಶಾಂತಾಸನರುಂದ ಭವನದೇ
ಭರಣ್ಮೊದಿಸುತ್ತಿರಾವುವವೇ
ಹನಸೆ ಅದಾಸತ್ತ ವಿಶ್ಲೇಷಣ ನಡೆತೀರಿಂಬೇ
ಭರಣ್ ನುಂಗ ವಿಗ್ರಹಾಯುವಿರುವೇ
ನಾಡೆ ಮಾಡು ಭೂಮಾಜುಸುಮ್ಣಲೇ
ಮಾಡಿ ಶಾಂತಿ ಭೂಮಾಜುಸುಮ್ಣಲೇ ಅಭ್ಯಾಸಿಸಿದೇ
Vishnu, lord of Lakshmi, the goddess of wealth, father of Brahma on his spotless lotus seat, the holiest in the world, generous protector of saintly people like Sanaka, the inspiration for the sweet and novel narrative of the killing of the demon king Ravana: Viranarayana of Gadugu, may you protect us all.¹

He who is always with his devotees, serpent-adorned, at whose feet gods’ crowns are laid, who is noble, unequaled, with a radiant eye on his forehead, who cleanses the sins of his pure-hearted devotees, who clothes himself in elephant and tiger skins: may he, Shiva, husband of Parvati, protect his devotees.
3.

ಬರ್ತ್ವಾ ಗ್ರಂಧಿಗಳು ಮತ್ತು ಹಿಂದೆಗಳನ್ನು
ನಿಯಂತ್ರಿಸಿಕೊಂಡು ಮನೋಭಾವವನ್ನು
ನಿಜನೊತ್ಪತ್ತಿಯಲ್ಲಿ ಪ್ರತಿಯೊಂದು ಹಿಂದೆಗಳನ್ನು
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ನಿಯಂತ್ರಿಸಿಕೊಂಡು ಮನೋಭಾವವನ್ನು

4.
He whose head sparkles with precious gems,  
whose face shines like moonbeam clusters,  
whose vermilion-marked forehead boasts a playful lock of hair,  
whose face is like that of an elephant,  
who holds a noose in one palm and sweetmeats in the other:  
may he, Ganapati, ward off every obstacle.

Goddess of autumnal freshness, seated on a lotus,  
born of all precepts and principles, inspirer of speech and writing; bestower of success in scriptures, ancient lore, and doctrines;  
grantor of unequaled expertise to Vishnu, to Indra, king of gods, to all sages and scholars:  
Sharada, * dance on my tongue with rapture and love.

* Sarasvati, goddess of learning and the arts.
೧

ವಿರೀರಾರಾಣನೆ ಕವಿ ಲಿಪ
ಕಾರ ಕುರ್ರವಾ್ಯ ಸ ಕರೀಳುರ್
ಸೂರಗಳು ಸನಕಾದಿಗಳು ಜಂಗಮ ಜನಾದ್ವನರು
ಚಾರುಕವಿತೆಯ ಬಳಕಯಲ್ಲ ವಿ
ಚಾರಸೂರ್ಡಳರ್ಲ್ಲ ಚಿತ್ತರ್
ಧಾರು ಹರೀ ಸರ್್ವಜ್ಞ ರಾದರು ಸಲುಗೆ ಬಿನ್ನಪರ್
ತಿಳಿಯ ಹ್ರೀಳುವೆ ಕೃಷ್್ಣಕಥೆಯನು
ಇಳೆಯ ಜಾಣರು ಮೆಚ್ಚುರ್ಂತಿರೆ
ನೆಲೆಗೆ ಪಂಚಮ ಶ್್ರತಿಯನರೆವೆನು ಕೃಷ್್ಣ ಮೆಚಚುಲಿಕ
ಹಲವು ಜನ್ಮ ದ ಪಾಪರಾಶಿಯ
ತೊಳೆರ್ ಜಲವಿದು ಶ್ರೀಮದಾಗಮ
ಕುಲಕ ನಾಯಕ ಭಾರತಾಕೃತಿ ಪಂಚಾ ಶ್್ರತಿಯ
೬

ಇಳ ಚಿಂಗಣಿ ಕ್ರಸಿಂಗೆ ಮಂದಿರ ಇಳಿಕಾಯಿಸು ತಾತಿತ್ತ
ಉದ್ದೆನ ಓಡಲಾಗಿ ಮುಂದುವರೆದುಟ್ಟು
ವಂತೆ ಸಂದರ್ಭ ಇಳಿಸುತ್ತಿದ್ದಲೇ ಇತ್ತು ಇಳಿಸುತ್ತಿದ್ದು
ವಾಯು ಸಂತತು ಅಳತದಿನೇ
ನಿತರಾಮ ಅಥೆ ಐತರಾಗಾರಾ
ಇದು ವಿಚಾರಸೆ ಬರಯ ತೊಳಸಿಯ
ವುದಕದಂತಿರೆಯಿಲಿ್ಲ ನರೀಳುಪುದು
ಪದುಮನಾಭನ ಮಹಿಮೆ ಧಮ್ವವಿಚಾರ ರ್ತ್ರರ್ನು

೭

ವಿಶಿಷ್ಟ ಸಮಸ್ಯೆ ಸಮಸ್ಯೆಗಳ
ಭತ್ತಿ ಅಂತಿಣಿಬಿಂಬವನನೆ
ನಿದ್ರ ಆಗಾಗ್ಜ್ಯ ಅತ್ಯುಕ್ತು ಸಮಾಜಕಾಲ
ನಿತ್ಯ ಮನೋಸುಂದ ವ್ಯಕ್ತಿಯತೆ
ಭವನಾಲಿಕೆಯ ಗುರುತಿಸುಲುಬು
ಇದು ವಿಚಾರಸೆ ಬರಯ ತೊಳಸಿಯ
ನರೀಳುಪುದು

೮

ಃದಂ ಕುಳಕ ಸಾಧನಗಳ
ಭಚಿಮ್ಮನ ಪ್ರತಿನಿಧಿನ
ೈದ್ರ್ಯಗಳಿಗೆ ಅತ್ಯುಕ್ತಿಯ ಮುದ್ರಣ
ೈಡ್ರ್ಯ ಮನೋಸುಂದ ವ್ಯಕ್ತಿಯತೆ
ಭವನಾಲಿಕೆಯ ಗುರುತಿಸುಲುಬು
ಇದು ವಿಚಾರಸೆ ಬರಯ ತೊಳಸಿಯ

Viranarayana alone is the poet, Kumaravyasa is only the scribe. The listeners are wise and godlike humans moving among us like the sage Sanaka. This is not just a fanciful, charming poem; it is beyond formal intellectual discussion. Learned scholars, listen to my words with single-minded attention.

I will narrate the story of Krishna in such a way that all intelligent people on earth will admire it. I will narrate the fifth Veda so that Krishna will be pleased. The fifth Veda, in the form of the Bharata, is the water to cleanse the heaped-up sins of many births, and preeminent of all the holy scriptures put together.

Connoisseurs of poetry should not look for lofty words or a display of the nine rasas in this retelling. It may appear to be just a handful of water with holy basil leaves; but, upon reflection, you will see here the greatness of Vishnu and all matters of dharma.
೧

ಶಣವಾಸಿರ ಮಹಿಮಾತನೆ
ಗುಜಿಗೆ ಸಾಗಿದು ನಾನಾಕ ಸಾಗಿದು
ಗುಜಿಗೆ ಸಾಗಿದು ಹೂಡಿ ಹೂಡಿ ಹೂಡಿ
ಮಾನೀ ಸೇಣಿಯ ಸೌರಾಣಕ
ಅಜಾಯಿತಕಾಂಗಾ ನಿಂತಿರು
ಮಾನಿ ಗಳುಗಳಿಗೆ ಸಿಂದುಕ್ಕಬಂತರಿ ಕೊಡುಗ

೨

ಕುಡಿಯಿತರಿಂದ ನಾಸುದೇ ನಾಡಿಗೆ
ಅಧರ ಅನಾಕಾರಾಂತೀಗೂಡಿಗೆ
ಅಂಬತ್ತರ ಹೂಡಿ sand ಹೂಡಿ ಅಂತಿಮ ಹೂಡಿ
ನಾಯಕರ ಮಹಿಮಾ ಹೂಡಿ ಹೂಡಿ
ಹೂಡಿ ಹೂಡಿ ಹೂಡಿ ಹೂಡಿ
ನಿಂತಿನಾಗಿ ವಿಜಯಾಂತ್ರಿಕ ಕೊಡುಗ

೩೦

ಪತ್ತಿಯ ಜನಾಧೀನ ಪತ್ತಿ
ಮಾನಸು ಶಾಖೆ ಪತ್ತಿ ಮಿಶ್ರ
ಪತ್ತಿಯ ಸಂಬಂಧ ಸಹಿಂತಿ ಕೈಮುಡಿ ಸತ್ತಿ
ಬಂಡಲಿ ಶಿಖರದ ಶಿಖರ
ಶಿಖರದ ಶಿಖರತ್ವದಲ್ಲಿ
ಬಂಡಲಿ ಸಂಬಂಧ ಸಹಿಂತಿ ಕೈಮುಡಿ ಸತ್ತಿ
ಸೂ. ರಾಯ ಜನಮೆರಾಜಗೆ ವೆಂದೆ ಶ್ಂಪಾಯನನು ಹ್ರೀಳಿದನು ಮುನಿ ದೇವೆ ಪಾಯನಭಿರ್ಣಿದ ಭಾರತ ರ್ರಕಥಾಮೃತರ್ ೧
ಸೂತನೆೈತಂದನು ಜಗದಿವೆ ಖ್್ಯಟ ಶೌನಕಮುಖ್್ಯ ಮುನಿ ಸಂಗಾತ ಪಾರ್ನೆೈ ಮಶಾರಣ್ಯಕ ರ್ರಾಶ್್ರಮಕಾತನನು ಕಂಡುದು ತಪಸಿವೆ
ವಾ್ರತ ಕುಶ್ಲಕ್ರೀಮ ಮಧುರ ಪ್ರ ರೀತಿ ರ್ಚನಾಮೃತದಿ ಸಂಭಾರ್ನೆಯ ರ್ಡಿದರು

0

ಮಹಾತ್ಮಾರುಹ್ರೀಳಿದ ಮನುಷ್ಯರು
ಮಾರು ಬೀಜಗಣಿತ, ಸಂಜೀವ ಸಂಜೀವ
ಕುಶ್ಲ ಸಂಜೀವ, ಪ್ರಭುರಾಜ ಸಂಜೀವ
ಸಂಜೀವ, ಸಂಜೀವ ಕುಶ್ಲ
ಸಂಜೀವ, ಸಂಜೀವ ಕುಶ್ಲ
ಸಂಜೀವ, ಸಂಜೀವ ಕುಶ್ಲ
ಸಂಜೀವ, ಸಂಜೀವ ಕುಶ್ಲ
ಸಂಜೀವ, ಸಂಜೀವ ಕುಶ್ಲ
ಸಂಜೀವ, ಸಂಜೀವ ಕುಶ್ಲ
ಸಂಜೀವ, ಸಂಜೀವ ಕುಶ್ಲ
ಸಂಜೀವ, ಸಂಜೀವ ಕುಶ್ಲ
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