

A Necessity of Comparative Analysis of Ancient Indian Literature – With Special Reference to the Epic Mahābhārata in South Indian Languages: Tamil and Kannada

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Language and literature serve as enduring cultural bridges, carrying traditions, values, and historical consciousness from one generation to the next. A comprehensive study of a nation's literary corpus provides profound insights into its civilization and collective ethos. In the case of Indian civilization, which encompasses a recorded history extending over several millennia, literature emerges as a crucial medium for understanding its societal structures, value systems, and cultural practices.

Among the many perspectives on ancient Indian society, one highlights the prevalence of social harmony and a well-ordered communal life. However, another acknowledges the pervasive rigidity of the caste system, particularly emphasizing the systematic marginalization of *Śūdras* and, more severely, the *avarna* communities (untouchables), whose oppression intensified during the medieval period. The eminent historian Professor D. N. Jha, in an interview with the BBC, remarked that "upper castes, feudal lords, and large merchant groups always enjoyed privileges, whereas the marginalized sections of society suffered from economic, social, and even existential insecurity."¹ Consequently, it becomes essential to analyze Indian literature not merely through the lens of caste orthodoxy but also from a historically grounded and realistic perspective.

For millennia, people of diverse racial, religious, and regional backgrounds have migrated to and settled in the Indian subcontinent. The Indian populace exhibits a rich mosaic of religious beliefs, cultural practices, and social customs. Yet, amid this diversity, an invisible yet profound thread—often termed the "Indian Soul"—binds them together. Like a string holding

together a garland of flowers, this Indian Soul transcends mere geography; it is an evolved cultural identity that has matured through centuries of shared history and collective experience.

The Purpose and Scope of This Study

The primary aim of this article is to cultivate an interest in the comparative study of Indian literature. Through this research paper, I intend to explore three key aspects.

First, I seek to elucidate the advantages of comparative literary analysis—examining how Indian literature has been shaped by various influences and how it presents contradictions in themes, expressions, social perspectives, and philosophical dimensions.

Second, I highlight some of the many avenues available for comparative inquiry within Indian literary traditions.

Third, I undertake a comparative study of the *Mahābhārata* adaptations in Tamil and Kannada with the *Vyāsa Mahābhārata*, focusing on the narrative transformations and variations in character portrayals that emerge across these versions.

Through the first aspect, I aim to provide a preliminary understanding. The second aspect introduces potential areas of exploration. The third aspect attempts a practical application of comparative methodology.

Indian literature is as vast as the sky—boundless and expansive. Therefore, this study selectively references a few poets and texts relevant to the discussion, acknowledging that the literary landscape extends far beyond the scope of this article.

Why Should Indian Literature Be Studied Comparatively?

Several compelling factors underscore the necessity of a comparative approach to Indian literary studies. First, as noted earlier, one of the primary objectives of such an analysis is to discern and appreciate the *Indian soul* that permeates the literary traditions of various Indian languages. Furthermore, modern literary scholarship increasingly recognizes comparative literary

analysis as an essential methodological approach, offering nuanced insights into cultural, aesthetic, and thematic dimensions of texts.

Comparative literary studies enable scholars to identify systematically the similarities, divergences, and reciprocal influences that operate between distinct literary traditions. Such a method allows for a more precise assessment of the unique characteristics of individual literary works. Moreover, by examining how a common literary theme is articulated across different languages, scholars can gain a more layered and qualitatively richer understanding of that theme.

Importantly, a comparison of the works of great poets facilitates an appreciation of the enduring nature of their compositions—how their poetry has transcended temporal boundaries to resonate with successive generations. A comparative study of Indian literatures further reveals the shared literary elements and aesthetic values that have shaped, and continue to shape, the national literary heritage.

Additionally, comparative analysis provides valuable insights into how literature responds to historical events such as social upheavals, ideological transformations, wars, and natural disasters. Examining works produced contemporaneously in different languages allows scholars to trace the emergence of common themes and cultural anxieties, revealing the interconnectedness of regional literary traditions.

Such a study also illuminates the varied ways in which writers from distinct linguistic and regional backgrounds grappled with analogous social issues and the diverse solutions they proposed. Furthermore, by investigating metrical forms and poetic structures, comparative analysis explores how the formal aspects of poetry in one language relate to those in another, probing the deeper linguistic, cultural, and historical factors that underlie these similarities or divergences. This line of inquiry significantly enriches linguistic and prosodic studies.²

By analyzing the socio-cultural contexts that shaped the emergence and evolution of specific literary genres and forms within different linguistic traditions, one can critically assess the reciprocal influence between society and literature. A comparative exploration of Indian literatures thus reveals layers of cultural meaning and historical nuance that may remain obscured in isolated, monolingual studies.

Finally, through an exploration of the interconnections and mutual influences among the diverse literary traditions of India, comparative literary analysis reinforces the idea of national unity. It powerfully illustrates that, despite linguistic and regional diversity, Indian literature constitutes a cohesive and deeply intertwined cultural heritage.

According to Articles 344(1) and 355 of the Constitution of India, the **Eighth Schedule** officially recognizes twenty-two languages. Nevertheless, there has been a sustained demand to include additional languages—currently numbering thirty-eight—including English, Bhojpuri, Tulu, and Pali, within the Eighth Schedule.³

Despite the immense literary significance of several of these languages, such as Konkani, Manipuri, Nepali, Bodo, Santali, Maithili, and Dogri, a considerable portion of their literary heritage remains either underexplored or undocumented. Although some scholarly efforts have been devoted to Tulu literature, a more thorough and systematic investigation is warranted, particularly into the rich folk and oral traditions that resonate with the broader Prakrit literary heritage.⁴

Factors That Influenced Indian Literature:

Indian literature has been profoundly shaped by various philosophical and religious traditions, which have contributed to the ethical, metaphysical, and aesthetic frameworks within which literary production occurred. Among the prominent philosophical schools that have significantly influenced Indian literary thought are:

The six classical schools of Indian philosophy (*Shad-darshanas*) have captivated philosophers worldwide with their profound insights. Among them, Sage *Kaṇāda* expounded the *Vaiśeṣika* philosophy through his *Vaiśeṣika Sūtras*. Similarly, though the original text attributed to Sage *Kapila*, the founder of *Sāṃkhya* philosophy, is lost, the *Sāṃkhya Kārika* by Sage *Īśvara Kṛṣṇa* serves as a primary source for understanding this school of thought. Sage *Gautama* formulated the *Nyāya* system through his *Nyāya Sūtras*, while Sage *Jaimini* delineated the principles of *Mīmāṃsā* through his *Mīmāṃsā Sūtras*, which are traditionally classified into *Pūrva Mīmāṃsā* and *Uttara Mīmāṃsā*. Sage *Patañjali* established the *Yoga* school through his *Yoga Sūtras*, and Sage *Bādarāyaṇa* systematized *Vedānta* philosophy in the *Brahma Sūtras*.

These six philosophical traditions have profoundly influenced Indian literature. The *Vaiśeṣika* school, with its emphasis on the philosophy of nature and atomic theory, shaped Indian scientific literature. For instance, *Varāhamihira's Bṛihat Saṃhitā* (5th century CE), which deals with astronomy and astrology, and *Bhāskara II's Siddhānta Śiromaṇi* (11th century CE), which covers algebra and planetary calculations, reflect *Vaiśeṣika's* rational and empirical approach.

The *Sāṃkhya* philosophy, with its dualistic framework of *Puruṣa* (consciousness) and *Prakṛiti* (matter), significantly influenced spiritual and metaphysical literature. Its impact is evident in texts such as the *Bhagavad Gītā* (especially the *Sāṃkhya Yoga* chapter), and the literary traditions of *Śaiva* and *Vīraśaiva* philosophies.

The *Nyāya* system, known for its rigorous logic and epistemology, shaped Indian literary traditions by fostering analytical reasoning. Its influence can be traced in *Nāgārjuna's* theory of *Śūnyavāda* (emptiness) and *Ānandavardhana's* *Dhvani* theory of aesthetics.

Mīmāṃsā philosophy, with its focus on Vedic exegesis, profoundly impacted legal and ethical literature. Texts like the *Manu Smṛti* and *Yājñavalkya Smṛti* bear its mark, as do the great epics *Rāmāyaṇa* and *Mahābhārata*, which incorporate dharma-oriented narratives.

The *Yoga* school, particularly *Patañjali's Aṣṭāṅga Yoga*, has left a deep imprint on devotional and philosophical literature. The concepts of *Yama* and *Niyama* (ethical restraints and observances) resonate across Indian texts, including the *Bhagavad Gītā's* discussions on *Bhakti*, *Karma*, and *Jñāna Yoga*.

Finally, the *Vedānta* philosophy, with its profound metaphysical vision, has been a cornerstone of Indian literary traditions. Its influence can be seen in *Adi Śaṅkarāchārya's* Advaita Vedānta, *Rāmānuja's* Viśiṣṭādvaita, and *Madhvāchārya's* Dvaita philosophies. *Adi Śaṅkarāchārya*, in particular, distilled the essence of the *Brahma Sūtras* into poetic expressions such as **Bhaja Govindam**, which encapsulates the essence of Vedāntic wisdom.

Beyond these philosophical schools, Indian literature also reflects the profound influence of major religious traditions such as Buddhism, Jainism, Sikhism, and Hinduism, as well as religious traditions introduced from outside the subcontinent, including Islam and Christianity.

Buddhism has left a lasting imprint on Indian literary traditions, influencing a wide range of languages, including Pāli, Sanskrit, Tamil, and others.

In **Pāli**, the **Tripitaka**, the Buddhist canonical corpus, consists of three principal divisions: the *Vinaya Piṭaka*, *Sutta Piṭaka*, and *Abhidhamma Piṭaka*. These texts form the foundational literature of early Buddhist thought and praxis.⁵

In **Sanskrit**, the renowned poet *Aśvaghōṣa* composed *Buddha Charitam*, a significant epic detailing the life of the Buddha, and *Saundarananda*, a didactic poem focusing on Buddhist ethical themes. The eminent philosopher *Nāgārjuna*, founder of the **Mādhyamika** (Śūnyavāda) school, articulated his profound metaphysical insights in *Mūla-Mādhyamika-Kārikā*, a foundational text of Mahāyāna Buddhism. He also authored *Suhṛullekha* and *Ratnāvalī*, contributing to Buddhist ethical and philosophical discourse.⁶

In **Odia literature**, during the 7th–8th centuries CE, **Buddhist Tantric Siddhāchāryas** composed *Charyāpadas*, mystical verses infused with esoteric wisdom and spiritual symbolism. Among these, *Kānhapa* (or *Kṛṣṇāchārya*) stands out, notably for his reflections on *Kuṇḍalinī Śakti* in the famous work *Aspr̥śya Sevika*.⁷

Bengali literature also inherits the *Chahryāpadas*, which constitute some of the earliest extant poetic expressions in Bengali, laying the groundwork for subsequent literary developments.⁸

In **Tamil literature**, *Seethalai Sāttānār*'s *Maṇimēkalai* emerges as a canonical Buddhist epic, richly exploring themes of renunciation, compassion, and metaphysical inquiry. The Tamil literary work *Kuṇḍalakēsi* advocates Buddhist principles, emphasizing the ascetic way of life and the essence of renunciation.

Parallel to Buddhism, **Jainism** has exerted an equally profound influence on Indian literature, especially in **Prakrit, Pāli, Sanskrit, and Tamil**.

In **Prakrit**, the Jain Āchārya *Kundakunda* composed seminal texts such as *Samayasāra* and *Nivvāṇa Bhakti*, which remain foundational to the Digambara Jain philosophical and ethical

tradition.⁹ These texts emphasize core Jain tenets like *anekāntavāda* (non-absolutism), *syādvāda* (doctrine of conditioned predication), and the path to liberation through ethical conduct and asceticism.

Sanskrit literature holds a significant repository of Jain religious texts, reflecting the philosophical depth and ethical rigor of Jainism. Among the most notable works are *Kumārapāla Kārika* and *Triṣaṣṭi Śālākāpuruṣa Kārika*, composed by the eminent polymath **Hemachandra Sūri**, which chronicle the lives of Jain Tīrthaṅkars and other exemplary figures. Similarly, *Harivaṃśa Purāṇa* and *Ādi Purāṇa* by **Jinasena** are foundational texts that present cosmological narratives and biographical accounts of early Jain figures. *Yaśastilaka Champū* by **Somadeva** stands as a major Jain philosophical and narrative work, notable for its stylistic sophistication and rich moral discourse.¹⁰

In **Tamil literature**, *Silappatikāram*, authored by **Iḷaṅkō Adigaḷ**, is a celebrated Jain epic, renowned for its exploration of dharma (ethical duty), justice, and feminine (Story of **Kannagi**) virtue. Counted among the five great epics of Tamil literature, it encapsulates the Jain ethical worldview through a dramatic narrative. In Tamil literature, *Jīvaka Cintāmaṇi*, a Jain epic composed by the 10th-century poet **Tiruttakkatevar**, stands as a remarkable literary work. This epic conveys the fundamental Jain ideals of **ahimsa** (non-violence), **vairāgya** (renunciant life), and **ātma-moksha** (spiritual liberation), imparting profound philosophical wisdom through its poetic narration.

Kannada literature, too, reflects a robust Jain literary tradition. Prominent among these are **Pampa**'s *Vikramārjuna Vijaya* (a Jain retelling of the Mahābhārata) and *Ādi Purāṇa*, which recounts the life of Ṛṣhabhanātha, the first Tīrthaṅkara. **Ponna**'s *Śānti Purāṇa* and *Bhuvanaika Rāmābhyudaya*, along with **Ranna**'s *Sahasa Bhīma Vijaya* and *Ajita Purāṇa*, illustrate the deep-rooted influence of Jain philosophy in Karnataka's medieval literary tradition. These texts reflect not only religious narratives but also profound philosophical deliberations on ethics, cosmology, and liberation.

The literary heritage of **Sikhism** is deeply embedded in **Punjabi literature**, with an emphasis on devotional poetry and spiritual discourse. **Guru Nānak**, the founder of Sikhism,

elevated Punjabi literary expression through his poetic compositions that emphasize monotheism, compassion, and social justice. His *Japjī Sāhib* remains a fundamental text of Sikh philosophy and daily liturgical recitation.

The *Śrī Guru Granth Sāhib*, compiled by **Guru Arjan Dev**, stands as the central scripture of Sikhism, encompassing hymns by Sikh Gurus and saints from diverse religious backgrounds, thus embodying a syncretic spiritual vision. Additionally, **Bhai Gurdas**'s *Vāraṇ* (ballads) are important poetic works that elucidate Sikh doctrines and historical developments, often regarded as key interpretive guides to Sikh scripture.¹¹

The influence of **Islam** on Indian literature has been profound and multifaceted. The **Qur'ān** has been translated into numerous Indian languages, facilitating the diffusion of Islamic spiritual and ethical teachings.

Persian literature, introduced through the establishment of Islamic rule, flourished in India, particularly in the form of **Sufi poetry** that blends mysticism with aesthetic refinement. **Amīr Khusrau**, a preeminent Indo-Persian poet, pioneered early Urdu literature, composing *qawwālīs* and **Sufi** verses that reflect both Persian and Indian motifs. His contributions are foundational to the development of Indo-Islamic literary culture.

Sayyid Bandā Nawāz's *Tazkira* further exemplifies the genre of Indo-Islamic hagiographic and didactic literature, preserving the teachings of Chishti Sufis.¹²

In **Punjabi**, **Bulleh Shah**'s mystical poems stand as a testament to the profound integration of **Sufi thought** within Indian vernacular traditions. In **Tamil**, **Umar**'s *Sīrāppurāṇam* narrates the life of Prophet Muhammad, marking a significant contribution to Tamil Islamic devotional literature. These works highlight the spiritual depth and cross-cultural fertilization within Islamic contributions to Indian letters.

The impact of **Christianity** on Indian literature is primarily marked by translations of the **Bible** into numerous Indian languages, initiating new forms of religious and devotional writing.

In **Telugu**, Christian themes entered literary production through **Kṛiṣṇamāchārya**'s devotional poetry, which interprets Biblical narratives through indigenous poetic forms. Similarly, in **Tamil**, **Veeramamunivar** (Constanzo Beschi), a Jesuit missionary, composed *Thembāvani*, an epic poem glorifying Christ, which merges Christian theological themes with Tamil literary aesthetics. These contributions exemplify how Christian thought was indigenized within Indian literary forms.

Indian literature, deeply intertwined with **Hinduism**, reflects the diversity of **Śaiva**, **Vaiṣṇava**, **Śākta**, **Gaṇapatya**, and **Kaumāra** traditions, each contributing distinct literary genres and philosophical discourses.

Śaivite literature has flourished across Indian languages and literary forms. In **Sanskrit**, foundational hymns like the *Rudra Sūkta* from the *Vedas*, along with *Śiva Purāṇa*, *Liṅga Purāṇa*, and *Skanda Purāṇa*, form key scriptural texts. The *Śiva Samhitā*, a major treatise on **Haṭha Yoga**, elaborates on esoteric practices, while the *Śvetāśvatara Upaniṣhad* presents a **monistic interpretation** of Śiva as the supreme soul.¹³

In the early phase of **Kashmir Shaiva Siddhanta**, the **8th-century** text *Śiva Sūtras*, composed by **Vasugupta**, serves as the foundational scripture of the **Trika Shaiva tradition**. Another significant work from the **9th century**, *Īśvara Pratyabhijñā Kārika*, was authored by **Utpalacharya**, contributing to the philosophical framework of the school. The **10th-century** scholar **Abhinavagupta** further enriched this tradition with his monumental treatise, *Tantrāloka*, which stands as a comprehensive exposition of **Kashmir Shaiva philosophy**. The *Rudrayāmala Tantra* and texts like *Kaula Tantra* elaborate on **Śaiva-Tantric** practices. **Ādi Śaṅkarāchārya**'s *Nirvāṇa Ṣhaṭkam* and *Dakṣiṇāmūrti Stotram* are revered **devotional** and **philosophical** compositions reflecting Advaita Vedānta fused with Śaiva imagery.

In **Odia literature**, **Nārāyaṇa Avadhūta**'s *Rudra Sudhānidhi* is a significant Śaiva-Tantric work. **Tamil Śaivism** reached poetic and theological heights through the hymns of the **sixty-three Nāyaṇārs**, compiled in the *Tirumurai*, and **Sekkilār**'s *Periyapurāṇam*, which recounts their hagiographies. The *Tiruvilāyāṭal Purāṇam*, another Tamil classic, narrates the divine actions (*līlās*) of Lord Śiva, blending mythology and ethical instruction.

Kannada literature also witnessed the rise of **Vīraśaivism**, led by luminaries such as **Allama Prabhu**, **Basavaṇṇa**, and **Akkamahādevī**, who composed *Vachanas* (devotional aphorisms), contributing to a profound corpus of spiritual literature in Kannada. In Telugu, **Pālkūriki Somanātha's** *Basava Purāṇa* and *Basava Ragada* represent significant Vīraśaiva compositions, blending biography, theology, and social reform. Likewise, in Telugu **Śrī Nātha's** *Kāśī Khaṇḍa*, *Bhīmeśvara Purāṇa*, and *Haravilāsam*, along with **Dhurjaṭi's** *Śrī Kālahastīśvara Māhātmyam* and *Śrī Kālahastīśvara Śatakam*, are important Śaiva texts that integrate regional devotion and temple mythology into literary form.

Among the religious traditions influencing Indian literary output, **Vaiṣṇavism** holds a dominant position. The *Vishṇu Sūkta* of the Ṛigveda, Puranic texts like the *Viṣṇu Purāṇa*, *Bhāgavata Purāṇa*, and *Nārada Purāṇa*, and Upaniṣhadic works such as the *Nārāyaṇa Upaniṣhad*, *Chāndogya Upaniṣhad*, and *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣhad* constitute the foundational scriptures of Vaiṣṇava thought. Philosophical treatises including the *Brahma Sūtrās*, **Ādi Śaṅkarāchārya's** *Bhagavad Gītā Bhāṣya* and *Bhaja Govindam*, and **Rāmānujāchārya's** *Śrī Bhāṣya* offer detailed expositions on Vaiṣṇava metaphysics and theology. The rich tradition of Vaiṣṇava devotional poetry is exemplified by **Jayadeva's** *Aṣṭapadī* and **Kulasekhara Āḷvār's** *Mukunda Mālā*, works of profound bhakti and literary elegance.

Furthermore, the two great epics, *Rāmāyaṇa* and *Mahābhārata*, serve as enduring Vaiṣṇava scriptures, both narrating divine incarnations and embedding core theological doctrines. Notably, the *Bhagavad Gītā*, situated within the *Mahābhārata*, remains central to Vaiṣṇava—and broader Hindu—spiritual practice and philosophy.

Vaiṣṇava devotional literature permeates all Indian languages. Both the *Rāmāyaṇa* and *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* were translated or adapted into nearly every vernacular, inspiring a wealth of indigenous compositions. In Sanskrit, **Kālidāsa's** *Raghuvamśa* Mahākāvya, **Magha's** *Śiśupāla Vadha*, and **Bhavabhūti's** *Uttara Rāmācharita* are prominent literary works expounding Vaiṣṇava themes of dharma and divine plays of Viṣṇu.

In Hindi, **Tulasīdāsa's** *Rāmācharitamānas* and **Sūradāsa's** *Sūra Sāgar* represent the pinnacle of devotional poetics, integrating intricate metaphors and deep devotion. Telugu

Vaiṣṇava poetry flourished with **Annamāchārya's Sankīrtanas**, **Kṣetrayya's Muvva Gopāla Padālu**, **Rāmadāsu's Kīrtanas**, and **Tyāgarāja's Kṛtis**, all dedicated to various forms of Viṣṇu, especially Rāma and Kṛiṣṇa. In Gujarati, **Bhālana's Rām Geet** and **Mīrābāi's Kṛṣṇa bhajans** are still sung widely, embodying personal and ecstatic devotion. **Narsinha Mehta's** celebrated hymn *Vaiṣṇava Janato* epitomizes Vaiṣṇava ethical and spiritual ideals.

In Assamese, the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* inspired **Hem Sarasvatī's Prahlāda Charitra** in the late 13th century, which is often regarded as the earliest extant Assamese literary work. The 14th-century poet **Mādhava Kaṇḍali** composed *Saptakāṇḍa Rāmāyaṇa*, a poetic retelling of Vālmīki's epic. Perhaps the most transformative figure in Assamese Vaiṣṇavism was **Śrīmanṭa Śaṅkaradeva**, who promulgated *Ekeśvara Upāsanā* (monotheistic worship of one God) and created devotional plays (Ankiyā Nāṭs) such as *Rukmiṇī Harāṇa* and *Kālīdamana*, which integrated theology, aesthetics, and performance art.

The influence of **Chaitanya Mahāprabhu** is deeply embedded in Odia literature. The literary period known as *Pañcha Sākhya Yuga* (Era of the Five Vaiṣṇava Poets) marks a significant chapter in Odia literary history. The five prominent poets of this era include: **Balarāma**, who wrote *Jagmohana Rāmāyaṇa*; **Jagannātha**, who composed *Bhāgavata Purāṇa*, **Achyuta**, who authored *Harivaṃśa*, **Yaśovanta**, who penned *Prema Bhakti Brahma Gītā*, and **Ananta**, who wrote *Hetu Udaya Bhāgavata*.

Bengali poet **Kṛtibāsu Ojha** translated **Vālmīki's Rāmāyaṇa** into Bengali. **Mālādhara Basu's Śrī Kṛiṣṇa Vijaya** narrates the divine plays of **Kṛiṣṇa**. Among the greatest Bengali Vaiṣṇava works is **Baru Chandidāsa's Śrī Kṛiṣṇa Kīrtan**, which is considered a masterpiece on Kṛiṣṇa devotion. **Vṛindāvana Dāsa** chronicled the life of **Chaitanya Mahāprabhu** in Bengali, creating the first-ever biography in Bengali literature. Bengali Vaiṣṇava songs, known as *Vaiṣṇava Padāvalī*, emerged as a distinct literary genre. Interestingly, even Muslim poets like **Nazir Muhammad** and **Syed Martusha** contributed to this tradition by composing Vaiṣṇava devotional poetry.¹⁴

Marathi literature boasts several significant texts that have served as guiding beacons. *Viveka Sindhu*, composed by **Mukund Mahārāj**, and *Jñāneśvarī*, written by **Jñāneśvar**

Mahārāj, stand out prominently. *Jñāneśvarī* is a profound commentary on the *Bhagavad Gītā* and holds immense spiritual significance for the Marathi people, who revere it as a sacred text for daily recitation. Similarly, *Bhāgavata Purāṇa*, rendered by **Eknāth Mahārāj**, vividly narrates Kṛṣṇa's divine play (līlā) under the title *Eknāthee Bhāgavat* and is a cherished scripture for daily reading. The *Abhaṅgas* penned by the saint-poet **Tukārām** deeply influenced Marathi society with their devotional fervor. In the eighteenth century, **Vāmana Paṇḍit** composed *Yādhārtha Dīpikā*, a Marathi commentary on the *Bhagavad Gītā*, while **Bal Gangadhar Tilak's** *Gītā Rahasya* remains a monumental prose work in Marathi literature.

Tamil literature reveres twelve great Vaiṣṇava saints known as **Ālvārs**, a term meaning "those who are immersed in devotion". Their devotional hymns, numbering around four thousand, were compiled into the sacred text *Nālāyira Divya Prabandham*. Tamil poet **Kamban** adapted Vālmīki's *Rāmāyaṇa* into Tamil under the title *Rāmāvatāram*. In Malayalam literature, inspired by the *Rāmāyaṇa*, **Chīraman** authored *Rāmacharitham*, while **Rāma Paṇikkar** composed *Rāmāyaṇam*.¹⁵

Telugu literature is rich with adaptations of the *Rāmāyaṇa*. **Tikkana** composed *Nirvachanottara Rāmāyaṇam*, **Gonabudda Reddy** wrote *Raṅganātha Rāmāyaṇam*, and the poetess **Molla** authored *Molla Rāmāyaṇam*. Later, **Viśvanātha Satyanārāyaṇa** crafted the epic *Śrīmad Rāmāyaṇa Kalpavṛkṣham*. In addition to these epics, Telugu literature saw the emergence of numerous Vaiṣṇava devotional *Śatakams* (century verses), such as *Āndhra Nāyaka Śatakam* by **Kāsula Puruṣhottama Kavi**.

During the Vijayanagara Empire, literary works predominantly aligned with the Viśiṣṭādvaita philosophy. Notable among them is **Śrī Kṛṣṇadevarāya's** *Āmuktamālyada*, a profound Vaiṣṇava text. Similarly, **Nandi Timmana's** *Parijātāpaharaṇam* and **Tenāli Rāmakṛṣṇa's** *Pāṇḍuraṅga Māhātmya* also celebrate Vaiṣṇava devotion.

The Bhakti movement had a profound influence on Indian literature, shaping its course across the regions and languages. Bhakti saints sought to establish a path of peaceful and righteous living while challenging religious orthodoxy, superstitions, and caste-based

discrimination. With the advent of Islam in India, the Bhakti movement found a parallel in the Sufi tradition, both promoting spiritual unity and social reform.

In North India, **Chaitanya Mahāprabhu** revitalized spiritual consciousness, while in the South, **Śrī Rāmānujāchārya** played a similar role, deeply influencing the masses. In Marathi literature, **Sant Tukārām** composed over 4,000 *Abhaṅgas* in praise of Paṇḍharpur's deity, Vitobā. In Telugu literature, **Annamāchārya**, following the tenets of Viśiṣṭādvaita, composed 32,000 *Saṅkīrtanas* extolling Lord Venkateśvara, firmly rooting Vaiṣṇavism in Telugu literary tradition.

Similarly, Kannada literature witnessed the contributions of **Purandara Dāsa**, a pioneer of the *Dāsakūṭa* movement, who composed numerous devotional hymns dedicated to Paṇḍharpur's Viṭṭhala. In Gujarati literature, the poetess **Mirābāī** sang countless devotional songs glorifying Kṛiṣṇa. These compositions were not merely eulogistic but also contained philosophical and moral teachings, making them worthy of comparative literary study.¹⁶

The Influence of Monotheism on Indian Literature:

The **Bhakti Movement** had a profound and recognizable impact on **Indian literature**. By the **Upanishadic** era, Indian sages had realized the presence of the **Supreme Soul** within the **self**. This understanding of the **Divine** laid the foundation for **monotheistic devotion** (*Eka-Īśvara Upāsanā*) during the **Bhakti Movement**, shaping spiritual thought and literary expressions across India. Monotheistic worship has left a significant imprint on Indian literature.

Mādhavadeva's Nāma Ghoṣhā in Assamese literature profoundly expresses the philosophy of a single supreme deity. Likewise, *Rukmiṇī Haraṇa*, written by **Śrīmanta Śaṅkaradeva** in Assamese,¹⁷ *Śrī Kṛṣṇa Kīrtana* by **Baru Chandidāsa** in Bengali, and the poetic works from the **Pañcha Sākhā** era in Odia literature reinforce this idea.

Marathi literature upholds monotheism through **Eknāth's Eknāthee Bhāgavata**, while **Tulasīdāsa's Rāmācharitamānas** stands as a monumental text in Hindi literature. In Telugu, the *Daśama Skandha* (tenth canto) of **Pothana's Śrīmad Bhāgavatam** exemplifies the concept of Viṣṇu as the creator, sustainer, and destroyer. Kannada poet **Kumāravyāsa's Gadugina Bhārata** and Malayalam poet **Ezuttacchan's Mahābhārata Kilippāṭṭu** also reinforce

monotheistic themes. These literary works, when analyzed comparatively, help assess the influence of the Bhakti movement on Indian literature.

Indian Literature – The Śākta Tradition:

The Śākta tradition, which venerates the supreme feminine force (*Ādi Śakti*) as *Parā Śakti*, *Devī*, or *Chaṇḍī Mātā*, has a deep-rooted presence in Indian culture. The *Chaṇḍī Saptashatī*, a sacred scripture found in the *Mārkaṇḍeya Purāṇa*, serves as a foundational text for Śākta literature.¹⁸

Several Tantric texts, such as *Śrī Vidyāraṇya Tantra*, *Devī Yāmala Tantra*, and *Rudra Yāmala Tantra*, elaborate on Śākta philosophy. The *Devī Bhāgavata Purāṇa*, *Mārkaṇḍeya Purāṇa*, and *Brahmāṇḍa Purāṇa* are the major Purāṇic scriptures that glorify the goddess. The *Durgā Saptashatī*, found within the *Mārkaṇḍeya Purāṇa*, holds immense significance, while the *Brahmāṇḍa Purāṇa* features the revered *Śrī Lalitā Sahasranāma Stotra*.

The Śākta tradition worships the goddess in ten principal forms known as the *Daśa Mahāvidyās*, each associated with unique devotional hymns. Among Sanskrit texts, **Ādi Śaṅkarāchārya's** *Saundarya Lahari* is regarded as one of the finest works in this tradition. Similarly, **Kālidāsa's** *Śyāmala Daṇḍakam* is a celebrated Śākta composition in Sanskrit literature.

In Punjabi literature, **Guru Gobind Singh's** *Chaṇḍī dī Vār* stands as a powerful Śākta text,¹⁹ while Bengali poet **Mukunda Rām Chakravartī's** *Chaṇḍī Maṅgal Kāvya* is a revered *Maṅgal Kāvya*. Assamese literature features **Śrīmanta Śaṅkaradeva's** *Kāmarūpa Chaṇḍī*, and Marathi poets like **Tukārām** and **Eknāth** composed devotional songs in praise of Goddess Durgā. Tamil literature also has notable Śākta compositions, including *Amman Tālaṭṭu* by **Vīravācīram Nāyaṇār**. Telugu literature is enriched by **Mulugu Pāpayārādhyā's** Telugu translation of the *Devī Bhāgavata*. Overall, Śākta literature has flourished across all major Indian languages.

Aspects That Offer Scope for Comparative Analysis:

Punjabi literature is also notable for the contributions of **Bhāi Gurdās**, the disciple of **Guru Arjan Dev**, who wrote extensively in the *Vār* poetic form. The *Vār*, a genre of heroic ballads, narrates stories of folk heroes and historical events, much like the *Vīragātha* tradition in Telugu literature. While rooted in folklore, many *Vārs* also integrate mythological themes. A prime example is *Chaṇḍī dī Vār* by Guru Gobind Singh, which, with its rhythmic composition, captivated the Punjabi populace. This text vividly narrates Goddess Chaṇḍī's battle against demons, creating an awe-inspiring literary experience.

Similarly, Bengali literature in the 16th century saw the emergence of *Chaṇḍī Maṅgal*, written by **Mukunda Rām Chakravartī**, a renowned *Maṅgal Kāvya*. A comparative study of *Chaṇḍī dī Vār* and *Chaṇḍī Maṅgal* could offer insightful perspectives on the literary portrayal of the goddess in different cultural contexts.

The Mystical and Philosophical Depth of Indian Literature:

Indian literature is profoundly enriched by the mystical and philosophical contemplations of Śaiva yogins. In Kashmiri, **Lallā Ded**, a mystic poetess of the *Trika* school of Śaiva Advaita, composed the celebrated *Lallā Vākh*, a collection of mystical aphorisms reflecting non-dualistic and yogic insights. Similarly, in Telugu, **Yogi Vemana**, associated with the *Achala Yoga* tradition, authored the well-known *Vemana Padyālu* (Verses of Vemana), characterized by their succinct wisdom and social critique. Vīraśaiva literature, composed in *Vachana* form, utilized native prosody and colloquial expression to articulate spiritual ideas and challenge social orthodoxies. Moreover, various Śaiva *Śatakams* (century-verses) and epic poems reflect deep metaphysical and theological concerns, illustrating the philosophical tenor embedded in regional literary traditions. A cross-regional study of these works underscores the intellectual and spiritual dynamism within Indian literary culture.²⁰

The Tale of Nala in Indian Literature – A Triumph of Righteousness:

The story of Nala and Damayanti appears in the *Aranya Parva* of the *Mahābhārata*, narrated by sage Brihadāsya to Yudhishtira. Indian tradition holds that reciting this story can

mitigate the ill effects of *Kali Doṣa*. Nala, the king of Niṣhadha, overcomes the adverse influence of Kali and ultimately emerges victorious. In Indian literary imagination, Nala is often perceived as a symbolic representation of *Nara* (humanity) struggling against fate and moral decline.²¹

This tale has been retold in various Indian languages. In Marathi literature, **Raghunātha Paṇḍita's** *Nāla-Damayantī SvayaṃvarāKhyān* reflects not only his poetic dexterity in descriptions and character portrayal but also embeds profound ethical reflections. In Telugu literature, the renowned poet **Srinātha Kavi Sarvabhauma** composed *Śṛṅgāra Naiṣhadham*, a work celebrated for its literary elegance and emotive depth. Tamil literature presents **Puhaleṇṭi's** *Nalavenba*, a succinct poetic rendering of the Nala story. These versions, though regionally distinct, converge in their affirmation of moral integrity and the ultimate triumph of righteousness over adversity. A comparative analysis of these works would highlight how Indian poets across linguistic traditions employed the Nala-Damayanti narrative to engage with questions of dharma, fate, and resilience.

Indian Ballads and Folk Song Traditions:

Indian literature is remarkably rich in folk song traditions, deeply intertwined with local cultures. The *Gāthā Saptashatī*, a Prakrit anthology from the Sātavāhana period, reflects the vernacular idioms and folk life of its time. Although primarily composed in Prakrit, it contains linguistic traces of Marathi, Telugu, and Odia, as well as folk motifs, wit, and colloquial exchanges.²²

Folk poetic forms are pervasive across Indian languages. Early Hindi literature employed native meters like *Doha* and *Chaupāī*. Odia folk poetry includes forms such as *Koili*, *Bhajan*, *Poi*, *Chaupadi*, and *Chautīsā*. Telugu folk literature is enriched by the *Dvipadī* form. Tamil has the didactic *Kural* and lyrical *Avagal*. Kannada boasts the *Ṣaṭpadi* meter, while Malayalam features *Ppāāṭṭu*, a genre of folk songs. Punjabi literature is known for its *Vār*, Bengali for *Vaiṣṇava Padāvalī*, Kashmiri for *Lol Geet* and *Śrukh*, and Sindhi for *Baits*.

Persian influences, through poets like **Amīr Khusrau**, introduced *Qawwālī* and *Tarāna* to Indian music and literature, blending folk motifs with classical elements. Urdu developed *Marsiya*, an elegiac form reflecting themes of heroism and tragedy.²³

A comparative analysis of these folk traditions, focusing on their metrical patterns and lyrical nature, would reveal deep continuities and regional specificities in Indian poetic traditions. For example, *Hari Singh Nalwa Dī Vār* by **Qādir Yār**, a ballad celebrating the heroism of the Sikh general, can be juxtaposed with Telugu's *Palnāṭi Vīra Charitra*, attributed to Srinātha Kavi, to explore how heroism and moral dilemmas are depicted in different regional contexts.

Debates on the Ramayana:

The *Rāmāyaṇa* tradition has been the subject of critical reinterpretation in several Indian languages. In her seminal work *Sītā's Voice in the Assamese Rāmāyaṇa*, **Tilottama Mishra** analyzes the portrayal of Sītā in 14th-century Assamese poet **Mādhava Kaṇḍalī's** *Saptakāṇḍa Rāmāyaṇa* and **Śrīmanta Śaṅkaradeva's** *Uttarakāṇḍa Rāmāyaṇa*. **Tilottama Mishra** argues that in these versions, Sītā is depicted as a woman of dignity and agency, questioning and defying patriarchal structures.²⁴

In Telugu literature, similar critical voices have emerged. **Muppalla Raṅganāyakam'ma**, a contemporary Telugu writer, authored *Śrīmad Rāmāyaṇa Viṣhavarikṣham* (The Rāmāyaṇa - Poisonous Tree), a radical critique of Vālmīki's epic. Ranganayakamma examines how *Rāmāyaṇa* narratives have historically reinforced male dominance and patriarchal norms.

While I may not fully endorse the perspectives of **Tilottama Mishra** and **Muppalla Ranganayakamma**, some of the critical issues they raise deserve serious reflection. A deeper, scholarly examination of their viewpoints is essential for a comprehensive understanding of the *Rāmāyaṇa* tradition. Thus, a **comparative study of Mādhava Kaṇḍalī's Saptakāṇḍa Rāmāyaṇa** with other regional Ramayanas—such as *Nirvachanottara Rāmāyaṇam* by the eminent Telugu poet **Tikkana**, *Rāmāvatāram* by Tamil poet **Kamban**, *Bhuvanaika*

Rāmābhyudaya by Kannada poet **Ponna**, and *Rāmāyaṇam* by Malayalam poet **Rama Panikkar**—would offer profound insights into the diversity of Rāmāyaṇa narratives.

Tikkana’s characterizations are exceptional, and his portrayal of Sītā, in particular, aligns closely with **Mādhava Kaṇḍalī**’s depiction. In Tamil, **Kamban** excels in conveying emotional intensity and the inner worlds of his characters. Kannada poet **Ponna**, influenced by Jain philosophy, offers a distinctive version in *Bhuvanaika Rāmābhyudaya*, making it essential to compare his Sītā with other representations in Indian languages. Although *Rāmācharitam*, written by **Chīrāman**, is one of the earliest Malayalam Ramayanas, Rama **Panikkar**’s *Rāmāyaṇam* presents a more refined and comprehensive literary portrayal, making it a fitting counterpart to **Mādhava Kaṇḍalī**’s work.

Mahabharata in Comparative Perspective:

The *Mahābhārata* tradition has also undergone significant regional adaptations. In Marathi literature, **Muktesvara**’s translation of the *Mahābhārata* stands out for its narrative brilliance. In the 15th century, Odia poet **Sarala Dāsa** composed his *Mahābhārata*, widely regarded as a creative reworking of Vyāsa’s text rather than a direct translation. A comparative examination of the *Mahābhāratas* in Marathi and Odia, alongside the Telugu version composed by the **Kavitrāyam** (the trinity of **Nannayya**, **Tikkana**, and **Errapragada**), would yield valuable literary and philosophical insights.

Among South Indian languages, **Telugu alone** boasts a complete translation of all 18 *parvas* of Vyāsa’s *Mahābhārata*. In contrast, Tamil’s *Villi Bharatham*, Kannada’s *Gadugina Bhārata* by **Kumaravyāsa**, and Malayalam’s *Mahābhārata Kilippāṭṭu* by **Ezhuthachan** render only ten *parvas*. These regional versions do not adopt a purely historical approach; rather, they are infused with **Purāṇic and Bhāgavata (devotional)** elements, transforming the epic into a spiritual and moral narrative.

In Kannada literature, **Kumaravyāsa** begins his *Bhārata* by declaring, "*Teliya hēḷuve Kṛṣṇa kathēyanu*" — “I will clearly narrate the story of Krishna.” This indicates that for Kumaravyāsa, the *Mahābhārata* is fundamentally Krishna’s story.

Similarly, in Malayalam, **Ezhuthachan** invokes Krishna in poetic lines:

"Śrī maya māyā rūpaṁ tēḍum paṅgili peṇṇe
Sīma illāda sukham nalkaṇam enukkunī
Śyāmala kōmala nā yūḍunna Nārāyaṇan
Tāmarasa sākṣan kathakēl"

(Translation: "O parrot, sing the story of that Narayana, dark and tender in form, lotus-eyed, who grants boundless joy to his devotees.") ²⁵

Here, the parrot symbolizes **Sage Śuka**, the narrator of the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa*. This implies that **Ezhuthachan** also perceived the *Mahābhārata* primarily as the story of **Krishna**. It is evident that Ezhuthachan composed his version of the *Mahābhārata* through the lens of *Bhāgavata* devotion.

Villiputhurar, the translator of *Villi Bharatham*, expressed that rendering the Mahabharata into Tamil gave him the opportunity to narrate the divine history of Lord Srimannarayana. This suggests that *Villi Bharatham* was composed with a **Bhagavata perspective**, focusing on the **devotion and divinity of Krishna**.

Therefore, it is most appropriate to compare **Sarala Dāsa**'s *Mahābhārata*, which is rooted in *Paurāṇika* tradition, with the *Kavitraya Bhāratam* in Telugu. Both **Sarala Dāsa** and the **Kavitraya poets** translated **Vyāsa**'s *Mahābhārata* with a strong *Paurāṇika* perspective. The *Mahābhārata Kīlippāṭṭu*, composed by **Thunchaththu Ezhuthachan** in Malayalam, the *Gadugina Mahābhārata*, authored by **Kumāra Vyāsa** in Kannada, and *Villi Bharatham*, penned by **Villiputhurar** in Tamil can be compared as these works reinterpret the *Mahābhārata* through a **Bhāgavata perspective**. Their retellings emphasize **Krishna's divinity**, shaping the epic within a strong devotional framework.

Both *Rāmāyaṇa* and *Mahābhārata* have been translated and adapted in nearly every major Indian language. Among these, the *Mahābhārata* has undergone fascinating transformations, especially in South Indian literary traditions.

Tamil and Kannada Mahabharatas – Aspects Contradicting Vyasa's Mahabharata:

In this comparative analysis, I focus on the **major retellings of the *Mahābhārata* in Tamil and Kannada**, contrasting them with Vyāsa's Sanskrit original. For this comparative study, I have selected *The Critical Edition of the Mahābhārata*, published by the Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute in Pune. To reconstruct Vyāsa Maharshi's *Bhārata* in its original Sanskrit form, the institute meticulously examined over 1,200 palm-leaf and manuscript versions and is considered the most authoritative edition of the *Vyāsa Bhārata* available. It should be noted that this comparative study focuses only on two Mahabharata translations in Tamil and two in Kannada.

Tamil Versions of the Mahabharata – Divergent Narratives:

The Mahabharata has been translated into all four major Dravidian literary languages—**Tamil, Kannada, Telugu, and Malayalam**. However, as previously mentioned, only **Telugu** has a complete translation of all **18 parvas** of Vyasa's *Mahabharata*.

The translation of the Mahabharata into Tamil is believed to have taken place between the **4th and 5th centuries CE**. However, some Tamil scholars argue that this translation occurred much earlier, between **500 BCE and 200 CE**. The poet credited with this early Tamil Mahabharata is **Perundevanar**, though his complete work has not survived.

Despite this, Perundevanar is known to have composed **invocation hymns** for five major Sangam literary works—*Akananuru*, *Nattrinai*, *Kuruntokai*, *Ainkurunuru*, and *Purananuru*. Additionally, references to his Mahabharata verses are found in *Tolkappiyam* and *Yapparungalam*, where they are cited as metrical examples. These verses, composed in the **Avagal meter** with occasional prose passages, align with the stylistic characteristics of **Sangam literature**. Based on this evidence, many scholars believe that the Tamil Mahabharata translation took place during the **Sangam period** itself.

Another Tamil adaptation of the Mahabharata is *Bharata Venba*, also attributed to **Perundevanar**. This work follows the **Venba metrical structure** and is written in the **Champu**

style, combining poetry with prose. The verses are in **Senthamiz** (pure Tamil), while the prose sections incorporate a significant number of **Sanskrit loanwords**.

Two unique character portrayals in *Bharata Venba* stand out—Karna and Sahadeva. In this version, after Karna donates his divine armor (Kavacha Kundala) to Indra, Indra wishes to grant him a powerful weapon called Vel as a return gift. However, Karna refuses and instead suggests that Indra give the weapon to his own son, Arjuna.

Another striking scene involves Bhima. As he attempts to enter the Padmavyuha formation, Sindhu Raja (Jayadratha) throws a garland, gifted to him by Lord Shiva, at Bhima. A devout follower of Shiva, Bhima immediately halts, bows to the sacred garland, and declares that all his ancestors have been Shiva devotees.

Additionally, *Bharata Venba* contains a distinctive folk element. Before the Kurukshetra war, Krishna tests Sahadeva's wisdom by disguising himself in a pillar. However, Sahadeva instantly recognizes Krishna within it. Many such folk narratives, absent in Vyasa's original *Mahabharata*, appear in *Bharata Venba*. These creative modifications reflect contemporary societal influences and serve to make the story more engaging and relevant to the audience.²⁶

The only fully preserved **Tamil Mahabharata** available today is *Villi Bharatham*, translated by the poet *Villiputhurar*. This version follows a **poetic style**, focusing strictly on the **central Mahabharata narrative** while omitting secondary subplots (**Upakhyanas**). Notably, *Villi Bharatham* **concludes with the coronation of Yudhishtira**. Therefore, **unlike in Telugu**, the **complete 18 Parvas** of Vyasa's Mahabharata were **not translated** into Tamil.

Like *Perundevanar*, *Villiputhurar* also portrayed Karna as a noble and dignified character. Similarly, in *Villi Bharatham*, Sahadeva is depicted as a Trikalagna (seer of past, present, and future) and a revolutionary thinker. Before Krishna embarks on his diplomatic mission, he asks Sahadeva if there is any way to prevent the war. Sahadeva boldly replies:

*"Krishna! You must be bound and imprisoned. Draupadi's hair should be shaved. Arjuna should be slain. Karna should be crowned as king. If only Arjuna is eliminated, the entire army of 18 akshauhinis will be spared."*²⁷

This striking response reflects Sahadeva's unorthodox and fearless perspective, making him a distinct figure in Tamil retellings of the Mahabharata.

In *Villi Bharatham*, Draupadi is portrayed as a woman of strong self-respect and independence. She firmly opposes any reconciliation with the Kauravas and questions Krishna with deep anguish:

"Krishna! In the presence of my husbands, that wretched son of a blind man dragged me by my hair. He attempted to disrobe me. It was you who saved me that day. But tell me, when will I finally be able to tie up my disheveled hair after avenging my humiliation?"

Draupadi's passionate plea underscores her unyielding resolve for justice, making her a compelling and independent character in Tamil versions of the epic.

A unique and poignant episode in Tamil Mahabharatas is the story of Iravan (known in Tamil as Aravan), the son of Ulupi. Before the war begins, a human sacrifice (Kalibali) is required to ensure victory. When no one volunteers, Aravan steps forward, offering his life for the success of his fathers, the Pandavas. His sacrifice is depicted with deep pathos, immersing the reader in the sentiment of Karuna Rasa (the emotion of compassion and sorrow).²⁸

This narrative, absent in Vyasa's *Mahabharata*, is a significant addition in Tamil retellings, illustrating how regional adaptations incorporate unique local beliefs and traditions.

Beyond *Villi Bharatham* and *Bharata Venba*, Tamil literature has several other texts inspired by the Mahabharata, including:

Aranilai, Vishaka Bharatham, Adi Parval Andhadi, Mahabharata Satakam

Each of these works presents distinctive retellings of the epic, further enriching Tamil literary traditions. These variations highlight how the Mahabharata evolved across different cultural landscapes, with Tamil adaptations offering their own philosophical, devotional, and folkloric perspectives.

Kannada Mahabharata – The Influence of Jain Traditions:

Among the Mahabharata adaptations in South Indian languages, the Kannada versions stand out distinctly, primarily because the earliest translations were deeply rooted in Jain traditions. In fact, rather than being direct translations, these works often read as independent poetic compositions. Notably, Kannada Mahabharatas did not fully translate all 18 parvas of Vyasa's *Mahabharata*; they primarily focus on the first ten parvas.²⁹

The earliest known Mahabharata in Kannada is *Vikramarjuna Vijaya*, authored by the great poet **Pampa** in the 10th century CE. **Pampa** was a court poet of the Vemulavada Chalukya king, Immadi Arikesari. Prior to composing *Vikramarjuna Vijaya*, he had written *Adi Purana*, a poetic work on the life of Rishabha, the first Jain Tirthankara. His Mahabharata adaptation follows Jain traditions and is structured as a *champu kavya*, blending prose and verse.

Pampa drew inspiration from Vyasa's epic but condensed its vast narrative significantly. While Vyasa's Mahabharata contains over 100,000 verses, **Pampa** distilled the essence of the story into just 1,609 prose passages and verses. Despite this brevity, he proudly referred to his work as *Samasta Bharata* (The Complete Mahabharata).

In *Vikramarjuna Vijaya*, Arjuna is the central protagonist. Draupadi is depicted as Arjuna's sole wife, and instead of Yudhishtira, it is Arjuna who is crowned king at the end. Since the work adheres to Jain principles, Krishna's character is notably marginalized. This is evident in **Pampa's** *phalashruti* (closing verses), where he honors the heroes of the Mahabharata but makes no mention of Krishna:

"Duryodhana in loyalty, Karna in truthfulness, Bhima in valor, Shalya in strength, Bhishma in eminence, Drona in archery, Arjuna in bravery, and Yudhishtira in righteousness—these are

the great men who made the Mahabharata a sacred legend."

(*Vikramarjuna Vijaya*, 4-14-64)

This omission reflects **Pampa's** Jain perspective, where Krishna does not hold the divine status he does in mainstream Hindu retellings.

Since **Pampa** positioned Arjuna as the ultimate hero, several narrative challenges arose. Events that placed Arjuna in a secondary or compromised role had to be altered. For example:

- Yudhishtira losing his brother's wife in the dice game
- Draupadi personally approaching Bhima to seek vengeance on Kichaka
- Bhima vowing to tie Draupadi's hair only after killing Dushasana

To avoid such complications, **Pampa** replaced Draupadi with Subhadra as Arjuna's primary wife. In the final coronation scene, it is Subhadra, not Draupadi, who sits beside Arjuna on the throne. Additionally, he introduces a dramatic episode where Arjuna, unable to bear separation from Subhadra, visits a courtesan's chamber—an event absent in Vyasa's Mahabharata. These changes illustrate how *Vikramarjuna Vijaya* deviates significantly from the original epic.³⁰

As a Jain literary work, *Vikramarjuna Vijaya* does not depict characters as purely good or evil. Instead, even the supposed antagonists are presented with noble qualities.

Duryodhana, for instance, is not merely a tyrant; he is portrayed as a man of great loyalty and generosity. His deep affection for Karna is emphasized, and his enmity with the Pandavas is attributed to his resentment over the mistreatment of Karna. Unlike in Vyasa's version, where Duryodhana's ambition and arrogance lead to his downfall, **Pampa's** Duryodhana is a man devoted to his elders and friends, making him a more complex and sympathetic character.

Similarly, Karna is idealized as the embodiment of sacrifice, loyalty, and truthfulness. Even after learning that the Pandavas are his biological brothers, he remains steadfast in his friendship with Duryodhana. **Pampa's** admiration for Karna is evident in his poetic tribute:

"Brother! When speaking of the Mahabharata war, do not think of anyone else. Remember Karna alone with utmost focus. Who can match Karna? Who possesses his battle prowess, truthfulness, and spirit of sacrifice? These are the very qualities that resonate in the hearts of people. That is why the Mahabharata is truly the 'Elixir of Karna'!"
(Vikramarjuna Vijaya, Karna Parva, Charama Gita, 217)

Thus, **Pampa's** Mahabharata, while deeply rooted in Jain values, also reimagines the epic's characters and events, offering a distinctive regional interpretation.

Unlike Vyasa's epic, where Karna is a tragic hero overshadowed by his fate, in Vikramarjuna Vijaya, he is glorified to such an extent that he is not even treated as a rival to Arjuna, but as a noble warrior in his own right.

***Sāhasa Bhīma Vijaya* – The Kannada Epic on Bhima:**

Another prominent Mahabharata-inspired Kannada epic is *Sāhasa Bhīma Vijaya*, also known as *Gadā Yuddha* (*The Battle of the Mace*). This masterpiece was composed by **Ranna**, the third among the famed **Kannada Ratnatraya** (Trinity of Poets), yet considered the foremost in poetic brilliance. Like **Pampa**, **Ranna also belonged to the Jain tradition**. His earliest known work is *Ajita Purāṇa* an epic detailing the life of Ajitanatha, the second Jain Tirthankara.³¹

Among Ranna's compositions, *Gadā Yuddha* is his most celebrated and significant contribution to Kannada literature. It is a **champu** (a mix of prose and verse) epic comprising **576 verses**. Like Pampa's *Vikramārjuna Vijaya*, *Gadā Yuddha* is also a **dhvani kāvya** (a suggestive poem). Ranna draws a parallel between his patron, King Satyāśraya of the Kalyāṇa Chalukya dynasty, and Bhima, the epic's hero.

While **Vyasa's** *Mahabharata* forms the **core of** *Gadā Yuddha*, Ranna's narrative also reflects influences from classical Sanskrit dramas such as **Bhāsa's** *Urubhaṅga* and **Bhaṭṭa Nārāyaṇa's** *Vēṇīsaṁhāra*. Additionally, **Pampa's** *Mahabharata* adaptation played a role in shaping **Ranna's** work.³²

In *Gadā Yuddha*, Bhima emerges as the undisputed hero of the Mahabharata story. Unlike traditional versions, where the Pandavas collectively engage in the war, here, Bhima single-handedly dominates the battlefield. Inspired by Draupadi's reminder of his vow in the Kuru court, he embarks on a relentless mission, leading the war against the Kauravas. The epic culminates in Bhima's coronation after he vanquishes Duryodhana in the climactic mace battle.

Since this work adheres to Jain literary conventions, it does not depict absolute villains. Even Duryodhana is not portrayed as a wicked antagonist, but rather as a *viṣāda pratinayaka* (a tragic rival). While he remains Bhima's opponent, **Ranna** emphasizes his nobility, cultural refinement, and sense of dignity, mirroring the influence of classical Sanskrit poets like **Bhāsa**. The depth of **Ranna's** character portrayal is evident in how he shapes Duryodhana's personality.

A striking example of this nuanced depiction occurs in the battlefield scene after Abhimanyu's death. Witnessing the fallen warrior's unparalleled valor, Duryodhana exclaims:

"No one else can match your bravery! If only I, too, could attain a heroic death like yours!" (Gadā Yuddha, 4-57)

This profound admiration for an opponent reflects **Ranna's** literary sophistication and Jain ethical sensibilities.

Both *Vikramārjuna Vijaya* and *Gadā Yuddha*, the two earliest Kannada Mahabharata adaptations, are deeply rooted in Jain philosophy. Their narratives reframe the epic from a Jain perspective, emphasizing valor, loyalty, and ethical dilemmas, while avoiding the portrayal of characters as inherently evil.³³

Similar trends can be observed in early Mahabharata adaptations in Malayalam literature. The poet **Ezhuthachan**, often regarded as the father of Malayalam literature, excelled in portraying the psychological depth and emotional struggles of characters. His style of depicting internal conflicts surpasses even the poetic expressions of **Nannaya** in Telugu literature.³⁴ In this regard, **Ezhuthachan's** work can be compared to that of **Nannaya** and **Tikkana** in Telugu, and **Mukteshwar** in Marathi.

Through this comparative exploration, we gain insights into how Mahabharata adaptations evolved uniquely across different linguistic and cultural traditions in India. These early literary works not only offer diverse interpretations of the epic, but also highlight the need for similar analytical studies of modern literature.

Footnotes:

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