

VELCHERU NARAYANA RAO
DAVID SHULMAN



ŚRĪNĀTHA

The Poet Who Made Gods and Kings

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VELCHERU NARAYANA RAO
AND
DAVID SHULMAN

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For Gary Tubb, in friendship

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Preface

SOME YEARS AGO we tried to interest a major academic publisher in an anthology of translations from classical Telugu poetry. The editors responded that they were unable to take on this book for two reasons: no one would buy it (an understandable argument), and there was also a principle involved. If they published such an anthology for Telugu, they wrote us, they would find it difficult to resist demands to publish similar anthologies “for other minor literatures.” We found the principle somewhat amusing, not to say insulting. Telugu has an unbroken classical literary culture of at least a thousand years. Its literature is by far larger than those in English, German, Italian, French, Spanish, or Russian, and its originality and artistic visions are in no way inferior to those of European traditions. We’re a little tired of explaining to the world where Telugu is spoken (by some 80 million people—OK, it’s in south India) and why it should interest anyone.

There are hardly any substantial monographs about individual South Asian poets who made a difference to their tradition and to South Asian literature as a whole. The very notion that one might be able to characterize a poet’s oeuvre stylistically and thematically, in a historical context and as part of a structured literary ecology, seems exotic to the field. Among the towering figures who emerged in the long history of Indian literature, Śrīnātha, in the fourteenth and early fifteenth centuries, could easily be seen as one of the most unusual. He definitely deserves a book of his own. Here is one poet who lives on, both in his very considerable literary production and in popular memory embodied in legends and oral verses.

Modern Telugu scholarship on Śrīnātha, which engaged the minds and energies of a number of gifted scholars such as Veturi Prabhakara Sastri and Bandaru Tammayya, has unfortunately concentrated for the most part on technical problems of dating and sources. Attempts have

been made to reconstruct his “biography” on the basis of obviously non-factual materials, read uncritically. Insofar as anyone relates at all to this poet’s artistic production, it is usually either in an apologetic or a straightforward eulogistic mode. No one has ever tried to come to grips with the literary meaning of his works or to provide a theoretically interesting way to read him. His sensibility, his particular kind of originality, and his poetics remain utterly unexplored. Although we are not uninterested in issues of dating and sources, as the following chapters show, we have tried to address precisely these domains of aesthetics and poetics. We have not neglected the rich oral, legendary material available about Śrīnātha’s life; we have tried to explain how such legends emerged and the particular interpretative directions they have chosen. Throughout, the cultural historical context and the evolving literary systems in Telugu and Sanskrit are crucial to our reading.

You do not need to know Telugu to read this book. We offer many passages in translation, and in some cases we try to explain the way a verse sounds and looks to a Telugu reader. Although the translations cannot fully convey the power of the original, we do believe that they offer a window into the particular richness of Śrīnātha and his time. Our hope is that readers conversant with other great literatures will find something here that will be relevant to their own interests.

We would like to thank Paruchuri Sreenivas, the apotheosis of Telugu bibliophilia, for providing us with digital copies of rare texts on short notice. We thank Professor Kolavennu Malayavasini from Visakhapatnam for very helpful discussions of difficult verses. Narayana Rao is grateful to the Institute for Research in Humanities, University of Wisconsin, for a semester’s fellowship that allowed him to work on Śrīnātha. Although we have been reading Śrīnātha for years and had long planned to write this book, the bulk of the actual writing took place in Hunamandala (the apparent site of Śrīnātha’s *Śiva-rātri-māhātmyamu*)—that is, in the elegant and inviting city of Budapest during the month of July 2009. We thank Yehuda Elkana, Ildiko Nagy Moran, and Krisztina Sebok of the Central European University for finding us a comfortable apartment where we could work undisturbed and for allowing us to remain mostly incognito for that month. Hungarian red wines were not unhelpful, either.

Budapest, July 30, 2009

Śrīnātha

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Introduction

1. Who Was Śrīnātha?

Every once in a while a real poet is born. Such things happen. But how often does a poet rule over an imperial realm of his own making? How often does a poet build an empire of words vast enough to last for centuries?

Classical Telugu has such a poet. He is called Śrīnātha. He was born in the Andhra coastal region of South India in the second half of the fourteenth century and died sometime in the early decades of the fifteenth. Modesty was not one of his weaknesses. He knew he had reinvented the very meaning of the word “poet” for South Indian civilization. Here is how his self-image comes across:

You want the fragrance of the *aragvadhā* flowers in the matted hair
of Lord Virūpākṣa on the banks of the Pampā?
Or the deep murmur borne by the breeze from the towering waves
of the Tuṅgabhadrā?
Or maybe the taste of ripening grapes in the banana groves near
Kaḷasāpura?
Or the gleam of golden earrings on passionate Karṇāṭa women?
Ask me to speak poetry. You’ll get them all,
in Telugu or in Sanskrit.¹

He mentions both languages—but he actually composed, as far as we know, only in Telugu, in a particularly musical and highly Sanskritized style.

He is one of the few medieval poets about whom we have considerable biographical information that survived in oral tradition, on the one hand, and in the prefaces he wrote to his own books, on the other. These two very different sources complement one another. The oral materials, which we

will examine toward the end of this study, present a vision of a poet whose verses look effortless, spontaneous, and at the same time complex and learned. They are easy to learn by heart, captivating in their sound, intensely energizing, sensuous to the extreme. All these features, captured in popular memory, are fully present in all the works he wrote.

Śrīnātha tells us in his own voice what he thinks a good poem should be:

A little crooked
like the crescent moon on Śiva's head,
sharp as the contours
of the firm, quickened breasts of the goddess
roused to fury at the end of time,
yet soft and delicious:
good poetry is all of this together,
dancing forever
wherever poets live.²

The poet seems to contrast two kinds of time in the space of this little verse: there is the time that comes to an end, periodically, when the cosmos is destroyed—and the erotic thrill that the wild goddess Kālī experiences at that moment, a thrill visible in the firm contours of her breasts, is integral to good poetry—and there is the “forever” time of poetry itself, dancing wherever poets live. We should note the three active components minimally necessary for a poem: a certain *vakrata* or “deviance,” “crookedness,” “curvature”; a definite firmness or toughness (*kāṭhinṣamu*), with clear outlines; and a taste (*sarasatvam*) that is delicate and delicious. Here is a poet who has the courage to say that poetry needs a quality of harshness, along with a slight crookedness coupled with delicacy—and who clearly thinks his own poetry has all these qualities.

We will look at the autobiographical prefaces in detail in just a moment. First, let us state, *in nuce*, the major themes that will occupy us throughout this book. We will argue that Śrīnātha produced and embodied a new paradigm within the cultural space of medieval South India. He shows us a poet in motion through space, tracing by his own footsteps the boundaries of a newly emergent literary world in Telugu. He made poetry into something you can feel, touch, and taste—a living entity that can be experienced through (only through) one's body. Whether he writes about gods or kings or ordinary people on the street, they all become tangible, sensuous beings within a rich, realistic world of flowers, fruits, animals,

crops, rocks, mountains, rivers, seasons and other temporal rhythms, tastes, and smells—all of them entirely specific, by no means conventionalized or abstracted. He is the model of the poet as the creator of reality through sound: as such, he brings an entire temple into existence, with its god and goddess, just as he can establish a kingdom and make a man into a king. In a sense, he created a new kind of book for South India—the well-integrated, thematically coherent, structurally unified essay (in the original sense of the word). He bridged the gap between a lively oral poetics and the full-fledged written texts of the sixteenth century, and thus he created a model for all future poetry in Telugu and beyond. He invented the Telugu short story and, one might even say, the notion of literary fiction. He is also the first to articulate fully an image of Andhra as a cultural and geographical unit. His voice, robust and expansive, is unmistakable.

In order to allow the reader some experience of that voice, we offer translations of extended passages and interpretations of Śrīnātha's major works. We will attempt to draw in the context within which he lived and worked as well as the thick intertextual fabric of other Telugu poets and patrons of his time. This is not, however, a biography of a person so much as a biography of a literary culture at a particular historical moment.

2. *The Poet's Autobiography*

Five large-scale works by Srinatha have survived: *Śṛṅgāra-naiṣadhamu*, a Telugu telling of the Sanskrit poet Śrīharṣa's *Naiṣadhīya-carita*; *Bhīmeśvara-purāṇamu*, also known as *Bhīma-khaṇḍamu*, which tells the mythological traditions about the major temple site of Dakṣārāma in the Godāvārī Delta; *Kāśī-khaṇḍamu*, on Benares; *Hara-vilāsamu*, a collection of stories about the god Śiva; and *Śiva-rātri-māhātmyamu*, which offers narratives centered on the annual Śiva-rātri festival. Each of these works has a preface by the poet with some autobiographical details and some reference to the patron who commissioned the book. Let us fill in the contours of these compositional contexts.

In medieval Andhra, men aspiring to be rulers invested heavily in poetry. To receive the dedication of a book by a skilled poet meant, for such a would-be king, the assurance of recognition and public acceptance. Such recognition was no small matter. In fourteenth-century South India, there were no major imperial centers and no great kings. What we see is a large series of rather small-scale, upwardly mobile individuals attempting desperately to

establish some secure political base. In the eastern Delta, where Śrīnātha was probably born, a dynasty of Rēḍḍi kings—non-Brahmin agriculturists in origin—had carved out a small principality centered on the old town of Rajahmundry, on the banks of the Godāvarī River, and on the great fort of Kōṇḍaviḍu to the south. A little farther north and west, at Rācakōṇḍa in Telangana (not far from today’s Hyderabad), a dynasty of Vēlamas (also farmers) acquired power around the year 1361. These Vēlamas called themselves Padma-nāyakas, and they were involved in more or less incessant warfare with the Delta Rēḍḍis. This period also saw the consolidation of a new dynastic center to the west at Vijayanagara (today’s Hampi, in Karnataka). Vijayanagara was destined to grow into a full-fledged imperial structure in the fifteenth century, in the decades after Śrīnātha’s death. Other even smaller-fry kinglets were operating throughout the Telugu-speaking region; some of them turn up in verses attributed to Śrīnātha.

In such an unstable and fragmented political climate, a poet was an enviable asset. His praise for his patron was an essential element in the elevation of a local figure into some wider, trans-local context. This praise took certain recurrent forms. Typically, the patron is extolled in the preface to the new work as a superb warrior and lover, a connoisseur of arts and sciences, and a lavish donor. The poet is also expected to produce a mythic genealogy for the patron, thus connecting him to ancient models such as the founders of the two main dynasties of the Sun and the Moon. (For the Rēḍḍi kings of Kōṇḍaviḍu and Rajahmundry, however, this warrior genealogy was less important; Śrīnātha has no hesitation about describing them as “clean Śūdras,” *sat-śūdras*, born from the god Viṣṇu’s feet, as was the Ganges.) The poetic work itself is classed as an embodiment of immortality, one of the *sapta-santāna* or “seven forms of progeny,” along with a biological son, digging a tank, building a temple, instituting an endowment, planting a forest, and giving lands to Brahmins to set up a village. Indeed, having a work of poetry dedicated to you was perhaps the most secure and lasting achievement of all this series: temples and tanks can be ruined, but a good book should last as long as the sun and the moon.³ Thus the patron and the poet were locked in a relation of asymmetrical dependence—the former being essentially dependent upon the good grace and poetic talent of the latter, who nevertheless needs the patron for his economic survival. If the poet was already widely known, his power over the patron was even greater. In addition to these purely practical concerns, the poet came to the court with the full measure of magical power over language, the power to create reality, to bless or curse. We will return to this theme.

One shouldn't imagine the dedication of a Telugu poem to be analogous to dedications we are familiar with, where the name of the dedicatee occupies some small space in the front matter of the book and is then forgotten. In medieval Andhra the poet addresses the book directly to his patron, who serves as the first and prototypical listener. His name appears at every narrative juncture, for example at the start and close of each chapter, and of course at the end of the book as a whole. What is more, normally the poet will describe at length the courtly situation in which he was first asked by the king to compose the book, including the choice of topic or story. In somewhat later times, the poem is even perceived as the poet's daughter, *kāvya-kanya*, given in marriage to the king—so that a kinship relation is established between patron and poet. This metaphor, however, does not appear in Śrīnātha's prefaces.

To give some sense of how this template works, let us look, first, at Śrīnātha's preface to his *Śṛṅgāra-naiṣadhamu*, the earliest of his surviving works. He begins by describing Māmiḍi Siṅgana, a "minister"—we will see below what this term meant—of the ruling Rēḍḍi king, Peda Komaṭi Vemā Rēḍḍi (c. 1402–1420). This minister, like any such wealthy patron, held court surrounded by various scholars, musicians, and courtesans. First Śrīnātha offers him some fairly predictable encomia:

His sword is aimed at depriving the wives of his enemies of their earrings.⁴

His arms give rest to the earth-bearing mountains, the Tortoise, the Snake, and the elephants.

His fame, like a dancing-girl, swirls through the cosmos.

His generosity puts to shame the Wishing Tree, the Wishing Gem, the Wishing Cow, and the monsoon clouds.

He is the minister of Vema-Manḍaleśvara [Vemā-Rēḍḍi]. He seals the mouths of his enemies' bad ministers.

His title is "Lover of Royal Courtesans." He is Siṅganāmātya, Pēddana's son.

In his court there assembled eloquent poets, experts in the four kinds of poetry (improvised,⁵ lyrical, picturesque, and narrative); scholars proficient in the sciences of Patañjali,⁶ Kaṇāda,⁷ Akṣa-carāṇa,⁸ Pakṣila,⁹ and others; performers trained in the texts of Bharata, Mataṅga, Dattila, Kohala, and Āñjaneya;¹⁰ ambassadors competent in the theory and practice of the three powers, the four strategies, the six qualities; Paurāṇikas who know all the compendia

and can discuss their meanings. Highly educated himself, at the end of a literary discourse, Siṅgana spoke to me, born in the Bhāradvaja gotra and the pure Āpastamba line, the beloved son of Māraya, who is like the Creator God of learning, and the virtuous Bhīmāmba, Śrīnātha by name.

He called me, honored me, and said with great dignity.

“You have the good graces of the Goddess of Learning. You have a special breadth of vision. You are dedicated to serving Śiva. You are a master of ultimate knowledge established by the essential meanings of all great purāṇas, beginning with the *Brahmāṇḍa*. Can anyone compare with you in good fortune?

You have already composed many works—beginning with the *Ārādhya-carita*, which embodies the scriptures’ truth—for my elder brother, Prēgaḍayya.

Now make a book for me relating the life history of Nala Puṇyaśloka, that ancient, wise king. Specifically, there is the poem called *Naiṣadha*, written by Bhaṭṭa Harṣa, the diamond crown in the community of poets, born like the moon to the ocean of Śrī Hira’s family, Māmalla Devī’s son, who meditated on the Cintāmaṇi mantra, who walked a path never imagined by poets before, who blazed a way into the court of the Kashmiri kings, a tough mind capable of writing the *Khaṇḍana* polemic,¹¹ master of the Six Secret Acts.¹² Make that excellent *kāvya* in the language of Andhra, **in my name**. Some people are too lazy to crack open Harṣa’s text which, delicious as it is, is in the coconut style.¹³ That’s how it is. If a young woman caresses the cheek of an infant boy, will he be aroused in his heart?”

He gave me betel and camphor, gold, clothes, and jewels, and sent me off. As for me, I made that great minister the master of my poem, which I started at once to compose.¹⁴

So now we know the context of composition: the choice, according to Śrīnātha, was the patron’s. It’s no small matter. Already in the fourteenth century, Śrīharṣa’s great poem was considered perhaps the most difficult and prestigious Sanskrit work. Śrīnātha is thus being challenged to take this rather forbidding text and to re-create it in Telugu. He boasts, as we shall see, of having succeeded in doing precisely that.

The preface thus works at building a double image. On the one hand, the poet depicts himself as having been recognized by the patron as a highly erudite and gifted scholar: “You have the good graces of the Goddess

of Learning. You have a special breadth of vision. You are dedicated to serving Śiva. A master of ultimate knowledge. . .” On the other hand, the patron, too, is elevated to the level of a highly educated and refined ruler, surrounded by the top pundits in various disciplines and fields as well as by ambassadors from far-away lands. He is also irresistible to the royal courtesans, a mandatory trait for someone hoping for power. These two men were made for one another, and they also share a mature appreciation for subtle and complex poetry. As the minister says to his chosen poet, “If a young woman caresses the cheek of an infant boy, will he be aroused in his heart?” The implication is that each of these men is fully capable of being aroused by Śrīharṣa’s coconut-style poems.

This courtly vignette is immediately followed by a full genealogy of the patron, who happens to be a Brahmin; and through the praise of this minister and his family, the king, Vemā Rēḍḍi, is also indirectly lauded. As in all major Telugu *kāvya*s, the preface concludes with several *śaṣṭhyantamulu*, that is, verses ending in the dative case: “[I am writing this book] for the glorious and auspicious lord who has subdued all his vassals, for that Winter who shrivels the lotus-hearts of his enemies, for the Love-God to all women, for the brightest Sun among all the king’s ministers. . . for Singanāmātya, the son of great Pēddana, protector of Vema’s kingdom” (1.40, 44). Only now, at last, can the book begin.

We should probably imagine that the completed work was read out publicly in the patron’s court, in the presence of the learned crowd described above, and with all the laudatory formulae that both patron and poet need to hear. Such a public recitation was the equivalent to our notion of publishing. Note that in the case just cited, the patron is still far from a royal figure. He is someone on the periphery of the royal court. Only toward the end of his life did Śrīnātha graduate to dedicating a work to a full-fledged royal figure—not the king himself but his brother, Vīrābhadrā Rēḍḍi.

Sometimes a more personal note steals into the preface, as we see in Śrīnātha’s *Bhīmeśvara-purāṇamu*; here the courtly scene is preceded by a verse honoring the poet’s grandfather, Kamalanābha, who was a poet in his own right:

Firm as the Golden Mountain,
lord of Kālpaṭṭaṇam on the coast,
author of the *prabandha* called *Padma-purāṇa-saṅgrahamu*,
a man to whom even the Kākatiya emperor bowed in respect,

a master of poetic art—
 I offer respect to him, my dear grandfather,
 the great donor, Kamalanābha.¹⁵

There is good reason to think that Śrīnātha is actually offering us a slightly displaced self-portrait in this verse on Kamalanābha and another like it, from the preface to *Kāśī-khaṇḍamu* (1.20), where the grandfather is described as both *kavi-pitāmaha*, the creator-god of poets, and as *sarasa-sāhitya-sāmrājya-cakravarti*, “Emperor of the Empire of Good Poetry.” Indeed, this seems to be the first time in Telugu literature that literature is conceptualized as an imperial domain with a single, masterful ruler. In the later tradition, and in the colophons the poet himself composed to his later works, Śrīnātha is, accordingly, called *kavi-sārvabhauma*, “Emperor of Poets.”

Following this salutation to his grandfather, Śrīnātha can now allow us a glimpse of his own artistic aspirations and the setting in which they were at least partially fulfilled:

I have composed many *kāvya*s—*Navamaruttu-caritramu*, *Naiṣadhamu*, *Sapta-sati*, *Paṇḍitarārādhyā-caritamū*—but, my desire unsated, I wanted to write one more.

One day Bēṅḍapūḍi Annamantri invited me to his court.

His family deity is Bhīmeśa of Dakṣārāma, who wears the moon on his head.

His overlord is King Vema, who is of the stature of Ikṣvāku, Mandhātṛ, and Rāma.

His fame is so bright it dispels the utter darkness beyond the mountain past the seven seas.

His gentleness recalls the gracefulness of the Love God.

His good qualities are praised in the countries of Karnāṭa, Lāṭa, Boṭa, Aṅga, Vaṅga, Kuru, Kukurū, Kuntala, Avanti, and Ghūrjara.

In the court, on one side there were scholars of both schools of Mīmāṃsā; nearby were those expert in the science of grammar as expounded by the great Snake;¹⁶ next to them, the logicians proficient in Kaṇāda’s text; on another side, those who have internalized the Upaniṣads and whose hearts rest in the fragrances of Vedānta; then there were poets who could compose in both Telugu and Sanskrit; courtesans and soldiers.

Having invited me, this man, who steals the hearts of all royal courtesans, offered me a seat and then spoke to me in deep and dignified tones:

“You’ve read out all *purāṇas*, *vidyās*, and *āgamas* for Vema Bhūpāla.

You created Śrīharṣa’s *Naiṣadhamu*, a hard nut to crack, in the Andhra language. You examined scholars of many countries when the king wanted them tested.

You spread your fame, like particles of camphor, in countries far and wide.

You come from Pākanāḍu house. You’re our relative, the grandson of Kamalanābha.

You’re a good man. Please make a book for me,

Śrīnātha, best of poets.

I have achieved all the seven kinds of progeny—except for a book.

To remedy that lack, dedicate to me a story of Śiva, in Telugu.

The *Skānda Purāṇa* consists of 125,000 verses, divided into 50 sections.

It’s like an ocean flowing into so many canals.

One of them is the *Godāvarī-khaṇḍa*, the very heart of the *Skānda Purāṇa*, a self-contained text, worthy of praise, which includes the great story of Bhīmeśvara-Śiva in Dakṣārāma, who was established there by the Sun.

Turn it into a poem in the language of this Andhra world.”

To seal the contract, he respectfully gave me betel with camphor, gold, clothes and ornaments and sent me off. [1.17–23]

With this cash advance from the publisher, Śrīnātha set out to fulfill his own wish—to write one more book. The first two works he mentions are lost to us; but we have already seen the commissioning of the *Naiṣadhamu*, and it’s clear that the poet was proud of having successfully “translated” this most difficult work. By now, Śrīnātha has some foothold in the royal court; he reads *purāṇas* and other books out loud to the king. But he’s by no means the court poet, or anything close to that. His patron is yet another “minister”—in effect, a local administrator, what in later times was called a *karṇam*—who is also a relative of the poet; they come from the same background, the same Pākanāḍu home base. This minister, Bēṇḍapūḍi Annayya, is also said to be devoted to the god at Dakṣārāma and thus eager to have a Telugu poem about that temple.