Book Excerpt: The Wonder that Is Sanskrit
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Book Excerpt

The Wonder that Is Sanskrit

Exploring the astounding word plays and linguistic legerdemain of our poets

The following are excerpts from Chapter Ten, â□□Interesting and Amazing Creations in Sanskritâ□□ of The Wonder that is Sanskrit, written by Sampadananda Mishra and Vijay Poddar and published by the Sri Aurobindo Society in 2006. This chapter can be found at scr.bi/WonderSanskrit; the book itself is unfortunately out of print.

Introduction

There is in Sanskrit a whole body of literature that is based on a play with the language. This is not great literature or inspired poetry, but more in the nature of linguistic acrobatics. These writings are often obtuse and not easy to understand because they require a great mastery over all the complex grammatical structures. Therefore, they are known as adhamakavyas, meaning â□□poems of a lower quality.â□□ However, far from being worthless, they demonstrate the amazing possibilities inherent in the language, along with the originality and creativity of the writers.

Several great poets, including Kalidasa, Bhartrihari, Magha and Sriharsha have made use of the adhamakavyas, sometimes even in their major works, in a spirit of playful indulgence. There are instances where entire epics have been written in this style. These are known as chitrakavyas and are part of the alankarashastra, or Sanskrit rhetorics. Some of the creations border on the unbelievable and would perhaps be impossible in any other language. Here we will look briefly at a few examples to enjoy their flavor and taste.

Varnachitras

The varnachitras are shlokas written with certain constraints on the use of

consonants. For example, here is one in which all the 33 consonants in Sanskrit come in their natural order:

à¤à¤ à¤à¤à¥à¤à¤à¤¾à¤à¤à¤¿à¤à¥à¤à¥à¤à¤à¤¾ à¤à¤¾à¤à¥à¤à¤à¥à¤à¤à¥à¤½à¤à¥à¤ à¥à¤ià¤ià¤£à¥à¤¢à¤£à¤à¥¤ à¤¤à¤¥à¥à¤à¤¦à¥à¤§à¥à¤¨à¥à¤ªà¤«à¤°à¥à¤¬à¤¾à¥à¤°à¥à¤®à¤¯à¥à¤à¤¾à¤¤à¤¾à¤¶à¤¿à¤·à¤¾à¤ à¤¸à¤¹à¤¸à¥à¤°à¥à¤¤à¥à¤¤à¥¤

â€œWho is he, the lover of birds, pure in intelligence, expert in stealing the strength of others, leader among the destroyers of the enemies, the steadfast, the fearless, the one who filled the ocean? He is the king Maya, the repository of the blessings that can destroy the foes.â€

And here is a shloka, where each quarter is written using only one consonant. The first quarter is formed of à¤ (ja), the second of à¤¤ (ta), the third of à¤- (bha) and the fourth of à¤° (ra):

à¤à¤à¥à¤à¥à¤à¤à¤¾à¤à¤¿à¤à¤¿à¤à¥à¤à¤à¤¾à¤à¥ à¤¤à¤à¤à¤¤à¥à¤à¤½à¤¤à¤¿à¤¤à¤¤à¤¾à¤¤à¥à¤à¤¤à¥à¥¤ à¤-à¤¾à¤-à¥à¤à¤½à¤-à¥à¤à¤-à¤¾à¤-à¤¿à¤-à¥à¤à¤-à¤¾à¤-à¥à¤à¤°à¤¾à¤°à¤¾à¤°à¤¿à¤°à¤¿à¤°à¥à¤à¤°à¤°à¤à¥¤à¥¤

â€œBalarama, the great warrior and winner of great wars, resplendent like Shukra and Brihaspati, the destroyer of wandering enemies, went to the battle like a lion, stopping the movement of his foes, who were endowed with a four-fold army.â€

Sthanachitras and Svarachitras

The sthanachitras are formed either by using the consonants of only one group or avoiding certain groups. This is a shloka using only the gutturals:

à¤à¤à¤¾

à¤à¤¾à¤à¥à¤à¤à¤¾à¤à¥à¤à¤à¤à¤¾à¤à¤à¤¾à¤à¤à¤¾à¤¹à¤à¤à¤¾à¤à¤à à¤à¤¾à¤à¤¹à¤¾à¥¤ à¤à¤¹à¤¾à¤¹à¤¾à¤à¥à¤à¤ à¤à¤à¤¾à¤à¥à¤à¤à¤¾à¤à¤à¤à¥à¤à¤à¤¾à¤à¤à¤à¤à¤à¤¾à¤à¤à¥¤à¥¤

â€œO you (the traveller of many countries), who bathes in the tortuous current of the rippling Ganga; you have no acquaintance with the sorrowful sound of the suffering world; you have the ability to go till the Meru mountain; you are not under the control of the crooked senses. You, being the dispeller of sins, have come on this land.â€

In the svarachitras, the restrictions are on the use of vowels. This shloka uses only the vowel à¤ (i) in the first line and the vowel à¤ (a) in the second line.

à¤à¥à¤·à¤¿à¤¤à¤¿à¤¸à¥à¤¥à¤¿à¤¤à¤¿à¤®à¤¿à¤¤à¤¿à¤à¥à¤·à¤¿à¤ªà¥à¤à¤¤à¤¿à¤µà¤¿à¤§à¤¿à¤µà¤¿à¤¨à¥à¤¨à¤¿à¤¨à¤¿à¤§à¤¿à¤¸à¤¿à¤¨à¤¿à¤¦à¤¿à¤¨à¥à¤§à¤¿à¤²à¤¿à¤à¥à¥¤ à¤®à¤® à¤¤à¥à¤°à¥à¤¯à¤¨à¥à¤· à¤¨à¤®à¤¦à¥à¤¦à¤à¥à¤· à¤¹à¤° à¤¸à¥à¤®à¤°à¤¹à¤° à¤¸à¥à¤®à¤°à¥¤à¥¤

â€œO Lord Shiva, the possessor of three eyes, the knower of existence, measurer and destroyer of the earth, enjoyer of the eight-fold superhuman power and nine treasures of Kubera, you who killed Daksha and Kamadeva. O Lord, do remember me.

And this unbelievable shloka of 32 syllables uses only one consonant and one vowel in the entire verse à¤¯ (ya) and à¤ (Ã®).

à¤¯à¤¾à¤¯à¤¯à¤¾à¤¯à¤¯à¤¾à¤¯à¤¯à¤¾à¤¯à¤¯à¤¾à¤¯à¤¯à¤¾à¤¯à¤¯à¤¾à¤¯à¤¯à¤¾à¤¯à¤¯à¤¾à¤¯à¤¯à¤¾à¤¯à¥¤ à¤¯à¤¾à¤¯à¤¯à¤¾à¤¯à¤¯à¤¾à¤¯à¤¯à¤¾à¤¯à¤¯à¤¾à¤¯à¤¯à¤¾à¤¯à¤¯à¤¾à¤¯à¤¯à¤¾à¤¯à¤¯à¤¾à¤¯à¤¯à¤¾à¤¯à¤¯à¤¾à¤¯à¥¤à¥¤

To enable the reader to understand this difficult verse, we give the anvaya, or the arrangement of the words of the verse, in their proper prose order.

à¤¯à¤¾à¤¯à¤¾à¤¯à¤¾ (yÃ¢yÃ¢yÃ¢), à¤à¤¾à¤¯ (Ã¢ya), à¤à¤¾à¤¯à¤¾à¤¯ (Ã¢yÃ¢ya), à¤à¤¯à¤¾à¤¯ (ayÃ¢ya), à¤à¤¯à¤¾à¤¯ (ayÃ¢ya), à¤à¤¯à¤¾à¤¯ (ayÃ¢ya), à¤à¤¯à¤¾à¤¯ (ayÃ¢ya), à¤à¤¯à¤¾à¤¯à¤¾ (ayÃ¢yÃ¢), à¤¯à¤¾à¤¯à¤¾à¤¯ (yÃ¢yÃ¢ya), à¤à¤¾à¤¯à¤¾à¤¯à¤¾à¤¯ (Ã¢yÃ¢yÃ¢ya), à¤à¤¾à¤¯à¤¾à¤¯à¤¾ (Ã¢yÃ¢yÃ¢), à¤¯à¤¾ (yÃ¢), à¤¯à¤¾ (yÃ¢), à¤¯à¤¾ (yÃ¢), à¤¯à¤¾ (yÃ¢), à¤¯à¤¾ (yÃ¢), à¤¯à¤¾ (yÃ¢), à¤¯à¤¾ (yÃ¢), à¤¯à¤¾ (yÃ¢).

The meaning of the verse is as follows: â□□The sandals which adorn the Lord, which help in attainment of all that is good and auspicious, which give knowledge, which cause the desire (of having the Lord as oneâ□□s own), which remove all that is hostile, which have attained the Lord, which are used for going and coming from one place to another, by which all places of the world can be reached, these sandals are for Lord Vishnu.â□□

Gatichitras

The next category of chitrakavyas are the gatichitras. These are variations of what are known as palindromes in Englishâ□□words or sentences that remain the same even in their mirror images. Noon and eve are examples of word palindromes and â□□Able was I ere I saw Elbaâ□□ is an example of a palindrome sentence. Here we have a verse in Sanskrit where each line is a palindrome; that is, it does not change when read forward or backward. The shloka therefore has an axis of symmetry at the center.

à¤µà¤¾à¤°à¤£à¤¾à¤à¤à¤-à¥à¤°à¤¾ à¤¸à¤¾
à¤¸à¤¾à¤°à¤¾à¤-à¥à¤à¤à¤£à¤¾à¤°à¤µà¤¾à¥¤
à¤à¤¾à¤°à¤¿à¤¤à¤à¤¾à¤°à¤¿à¤µà¤§à¤¾ à¤¸à¥à¤¨à¤¾
à¤¨à¤¾à¤¸à¥à¤§à¤¾à¤µà¤°à¤¿à¤¤à¤à¤¾à¤°à¤¿à¤à¤¾à¥¤à¥¤

â□□It is very difficult to face this army which is endowed with elephants as big as mountains. This is a very great army, and the shouting of frightened people is heard. It has slain its enemies.â□□

In the following shloka the entire verse forms a palindrome. Therefore, the second line is the same as the first line but in reverse.

à¤¨à¤¿à¤¶à¤¿à¤¤à¤¾à¤¸à¤¿à¤°à¤¤à¥à¤½à¤-à¥à¤à¥
à¤¨à¥à¤¯à¥à¤à¤¤à¥à¤½à¤®à¤°à¤£à¤¾ à¤°à¥à¤à¤¾à¥¤
à¤à¤¾à¤°à¥à¤£à¤¾ à¤°à¤®à¤¤à¥ à¤à¤¨à¥à¤¯à¥ à¤à¥ à¤-à¥à¤¤à¥
à¤°à¤¸à¤¿à¤¤à¤¾à¤¶à¤¿à¤¨à¤¿à¥¤à¥¤

â€œO immortals, indeed, the lover of sharp swords, the fearless man does not tremble like a frightened man in this battle full of beautiful chariots and demons who are devourers of men.â€

There are many interesting examples of this variety. Here is one from a poem where in each shloka the first line describes Rama and the second line Krishna. The striking feature is that the second line is always the reverse of the first line.

à¤¤à¤
à¤-à¥à¤¸à¥à¤¤à¤®à¥à¤à¥à¤¤à¤®à¥à¤¦à¤¾à¤°à¤¹à¤¾à¤¸à¤
à¤µà¤¨à¥à¤¦à¥ à¤¯à¤¤à¥ à¤-à¤µà¥à¤¯à¤-à¤µà¤
à¤¦à¤¾à¤¶à¥à¤°à¥à¤à¥¤ à¤¶à¥à¤°à¥à¤¯à¤¾à¤¦à¤µà¤
à¤-à¤µà¥à¤¯à¤-à¤¤à¥à¤¯à¤¦à¤¸à¥à¤¤à¤µà¤
à¤¸à¤à¤¹à¤¾à¤°à¤¦à¤¸à¥à¤®à¥à¤à¥à¤¤à¤®à¤¸à¥à¤¸à¤¸à¥à¤¤à¤®à¥à¤¯à¥à¤¤à¥¤

The first line, addressed to Rama, in prose order is: â€œI pay my homage to him who released Sita, whose laughter is deep, whose embodiment is grand and from whom mercy and splendor arise everywhere.â€

The second line, addressed to Krishna, in prose order is: â€œI bow down before Krishna, the descendant of Yadava family, who is the lord of the sun as well as the moon, who liberated even her (Pootana) who wanted to bring an end to his life, and who is the soul of this entire universe.â€

Chitrabandhas

In the chitrabandhas, when the shloka is written out, the letters form interesting geometric patterns. Our last example in this category is exceptionally beautiful. It is based on a well-known problem in mathematics. The challenge is to place a knight in one corner of the chessboard and to cover all 64 squares with the knight, without landing on any square twice. The French mathematician Euler found the answer to this problem in the 17th century. This is why this is known as Eulerâ□□s chess and knight problem.

In India, a manuscript called Padukasahasram has been found, written by a Tamil saint Shri Desikan, in which there are a thousand verses written in praise of the wooden sandals of Lord Rama. In one of the chapters the saint has written the verses in various chitrakavyas. In the example given here, there are two shlokas, one after the other. The syllables of the first shloka are written out in the squares on a chessboard. Then, beginning with the first syllable, if the second shloka is read among the letters of the first shloka, one finds that the letters follow the movement of the knight on the chessboard, giving simultaneously a solution to the chess-knight problem. In fact, the writing of the verses in this fashion is far more difficult than the original chess-knight problem. One is even more amazed when one realizes that the manuscript is of the 10th century and the saint lived 700 years before Euler [download the chapter file for a chart].

Some Interesting Verses

The devotional movement in India gave rise to different types of poetic expressions. We end our chapter with two interesting anecdotes regarding king Bhoja, whose court-poet was Kalidasa. Bhoja was a great patron of Sanskrit and himself a poet. It was a common saying that in the kingdom of Bhoja, everyone was a poet. An ambassador from another kingdom happened to be there but said this was an exaggeration and was not possible. So he went out into the kingdom and far away found a poor weaver, working from morning to night to earn his living. He brought the weaver to the court and in front of the king asked him whether he could compose poetry. The weaver replied in all humility:

à¤□à¤¾à¤µà¥□à¤¯à¤□ à¤□à¤°à¥□à¤®à¤¿ à¤¨ à¤¹à¤¿ à¤□à¤¾à¤°à¥□à¤¤à¤°à¤□ à¤□à¤°à¥□à¤®à¤¿ à¤¯à¤¤à¥□à¤¨à¤¾à¤¤à¥□ à¤□à¤°à¥□à¤®à¤¿ à¤¯à¤¦à¤¿ à¤□à¤¾à¤°à¥□à¤¤à¤°à¤□ à¤□à¤°à¥□à¤®à¤¿à¥¤ à¤-à¥□à¤ª à¤¾à¤²à¤®à¥□à¤²à¤¿à¤®à¤£à¤¿à¤®à¤£à¤¿à¤¡à¤¤à¤ª à¤¾à¤¦à¥□à¤

à¤¹à¥ à¤-à¥à¤à¤°à¤¾à¤ à¤à¤µà¤¯à¤¾à¤®à¤¿ à¤µà¤¯à¤¾à¤®à¤¿ à¤¯à¤¾à¤®à¤¿à¥¤à¥¤

â□□I compose poetry but not very well. If I make an effort I may be able to improve. O Bhoja, whose footrest is encrusted with jewels from the crowns of kings, I compose poetry, I weave and, with your permission, I am going.â□□

The shloka of the weaver is charming in its beauty and its humility, and its final play with the three wordsâ□□kavayami, vayami, and yamiâ□□where each subsequent verb is obtained from the previous one by deleting the first syllable.

The literature of chitrakavyas is a veritable ocean. What have been given here are just a few examples, which give merely a fleeting glimpse of the extent, the variety and the richness of its contents. These types of creations demand a great ingenuity and creativity from the writers and reveal the versatility and immense possibilities of this language, which can become a perfect tool and vehicle in the hands of a master.