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Rajendran Chettiarthodi
crajenin@yahoo.com
(Calicat University)

Sanskritization of Regional History: A Study in the Historiography of Atula's *Mūṣikavaṃśa*[1]

SUMMARY: *Mūṣikavaṃśa* (also known as *Mūṣakavaṃśa*) is a historical *mahākāvya* written by Atula, who was a court poet of King Śrīkaṇṭha, alias Rājadharma, who lived in the 11th century AD. The work antedates even *Rājataraṅginī* of Kalhaṇa, which is regarded as one of the earliest historical *mahākāvya*s in Sanskrit. The work deals with the history of the Mūṣika dynasty, which ruled the Kolattunādu kingdom of North Kerala. The earlier parts of the *mahākāvya* deal with legendary matters, such as the mythical origin of the lineage; but as the work progresses, it deals with many historical data including details of the kings, geographical features, temples and other centres of culture, various religious sects, art, literature and architecture, commerce and shipping. This work, one of the pioneer efforts to represent provincial history in classical garb, using the literary conventions of the *mahākāvya* genre, as well as a virtual storehouse of knowledge regarding the history of Northern Kerala, is an interesting amalgam of myths and facts. An analysis of the work will yield rich insights into ancient Indian historiography. The present paper is an attempt to investigate the manner in which poet Atula makes use of facts of regional history to fit into the structure of a Sanskrit *mahākāvya*.

[1] Sheldon Pollock objects to the term 'sanskritization' as lacking in 'intellectual content' when applied in the context of the adaptation of Sanskrit by groups such as the Buddhists of northern India (Pollock 2006: 513–514). It may be clarified that here the word is used in the narrow sense of writing local history in the Sanskrit language, finding equivalents of regional names in Sanskrit, and following the canons of classical Sanskrit poetry in historiography. I would also like to point out that it includes the process of classical mythology also being pressed into service for the legitimisation of local kingdoms.

KEYWORDS: Sanskritization, regional history, *Mūṣikavaṃśa,* historical *mahākāvya*s, Atula, King Śrīkaṇṭha, *Rājataraṅginī*, Kalhaṇa, Kolattunādu kingdom of North Kerala.

Mūṣikavaṃśa is an interesting historical poem about the dynastical lineage of a royal family of North Kerala known by that name. It is now generally maintained that the kings of the dynasty ruled over the territory comprising Kolattunādu of later times. The poem was brought to the attention of the world of scholars in 1916 by T. A. Gopinatha Rao. The work, available in two incomplete manuscripts deposited in the collection of the Kerala University Oriental Research and Manuscripts Library, was published by Dr. K. Raghavan Pillai in 1977. The published version consists of about 1000 verses arranged in 15 cantos. The name of the author can be ascertained as Atula on the basis of the colophons available at the end of some cantos of the work. From the work, it can also be gathered that the author was a court poet of the Mūṣika king, Śrīkaṇṭha, alias Rājadharma, with whose description the existing version of the poem comes to an end. Though the exact date of the work cannot be determined, it cannot be later than the 12th century, the date of the reign of King Śrīkaṇṭha. The poem, thus, is either roughly of the same date as that of the celebrated *Rājataraṅgiṇī* of Kalhaṇa or even slightly earlier than it. However, there are fresh evidences which suggest a slightly earlier date for the work. King Śrīkaṇṭha, contemporary with Atula, is referred to by the term *kartṛ* in the following verse:

> *lakṣmyā pratītayaśasā bhuvi kartṛnāmnā bhartrāhvayena ca dadhad*
> [*dadhatā?*] *vaṭukeśvarākhyām /*
> *puṁso vapurvidhirivaiṣajarāvatīrṇam bhūyovatīrṇa iva yah prathamo*
> *varāhaḥ //*[2]

M. G. S. Narayanan maintains that *kartṛ* and *kāri* are synonymous, and on the basis of this, he identifies him with Kaṇdan Kāri of the Eramam–Chalapuram inscription belonging to AD 1020 and maintains that

[2] *Mūṣikavaṃśa* XV, verse no. 37. M. G. S. Narayanan cites it as verse no 36. See Narayanan 1970: 188.

the work has to be assigned to the first half of the 11th century.[3] Thus, the work assumes tremendous significance as one of the earliest specimens of Sanskrit historiography as well as Sanskrit poetry composed in Kerala, which has a linguistic background different from that of the Indo–Aryan language stock. It effects a fusion of local history and classical framework of historiography reflecting the court culture of classical Sanskrit literature as typified by the canons of *mahākāvya*. The present paper proposes to investigate the manner in which the author brought about the fusion.

The story begins with an account of a pregnant queen, guarded by her family priest, escaping the animosity of sage Jāmadagnya Rāma, more popularly known as Paraśurāma ('Rama with axe') in the West coast of India, reaching the mountain called Eli. She is assaulted by a huge rat, which, however, is consumed by the flames emitted from her eyes and transformed into the form of the king of that mountain. He explains that he was transformed into a rat due to the curse of sage Kauśika. The queen delivers a male child, who later was properly educated by her priest. Thereupon, the poet narrates an interesting myth involving the story of a particular sacrifice conducted by Paraśurāma, the arch rival of *kṣatriya*s, to escape from whose wrath, the queen had fled to the mountain. It is mentioned that for the completion of the rite, he required the help of a *kṣatriya* and with the help of Parvatarāja, the mountain king, he got the services of the prince living in a cave. Afterwards the prince was consecrated in a temple by Paraśurāma and, due to this fact and also due to the fact that he was born in the Mūṣika mountain, got the name Rāmaghaṭa Mūṣika. King Rāmaghaṭa appoints Mahānāvika, a merchant (*śreṣṭhin*) from Māhiṣmatī, as his minister and builds Kola, the capital city of the dynasty. Crossing the Killā river, he visits the mountain and seeks the blessing of Paraśurāma. Learning about the subjugation of the Hehayas, his ancestors, by Suvarman, the king of Magadha, he starts his expedition of Deccan. He conquers his ancestral kingdom of Hehaya killing King Suvarman.

[3] Narayanan 1970: 191.

He makes the son of Suvarman, presented by the chief queen, the king of Magadha. He marries Suvarman's daughter Bhadrasenā and installs his eldest son by her on the throne of the Hehaya kingdom and returns to the Mūṣika kingdom with his youngest son Nandana. Rāmaghaṭa retires to the forest after making him the king. The pleasure -loving Nandana was succeeded by a lineage, among who were Ugra, Ugradhanvā, Siṃhasena, Candravarman, Bṛhatsuta and Ugrāśva. Ugrāśva entrusted the kingdom to Bṛhatsena, but when the latter died without an heir, he had to resume royal power again when the mighty Keralas attacked the kingdom. He repelled the enemies and after enthroning his son Citraketana, retired to the forest again. Then comes a long list of kings, ending with Śrīkaṇṭha, the patron of Atula.

The analysis of the poem is beset with some problems, the first one being its name itself. Both *Mūṣakavaṃśa* and *Mūṣikavaṃśa* are used rather indiscriminately to refer to the dynasty and the poem itself. Kunjunni Raja consistently uses the former word whereas in recent works, Raghavan Pillai and N. P. Unni use the word *Mūṣikavaṃśa*. Pillai informs that both the variants are found in the manuscripts. As per Monier-Williams, both mean the same, signifying 'the dynasty of a rat'. The reason for the appellation is obviously the giant rat appearing in the beginnings of the poem, who was actually the Lord of the Eli Mountain, the seat of the royal family, transformed into a rat due to the curse of sage Kauśika. According to Cirakkal Balakrishnan Nair, the son of a prince belonging to the Cirakkal royal family of the neighbourhood, which was a branch of the Kolattiri dynasty, the very myth of the rat owes its origin to the false etymology of Elimala as the mountain of rats. There is a mountain called Ezhimala in Malayalam in north Kerala, which very much fits into the description of the Eli mountain in the poem. Balakrishna Nair suggests that it was due to the mispronunciation of the word *ezhi* as *'eli'* by Europeans, which means a rat in the Malayalam language, that the lineage was named as Mūṣikavaṃśa. But this conjecture seems to be wrong since the word *mūṣika* occurs in the poem itself. There have been attempts to trace the word *mūṣika* to the plant *śirīṣa*, called *vāka* (*Acacia Sirissa*)

in Malayalam, which grew abundantly on the hill and which was something like a totem of the royalty. It is reported by Balakrishnan Nair that a golden medal belonging to the Cirakkal royal family has a bunch of *śirīṣa* flowers between what he calls two *nandaka*s (possibly a type of swords) and five stars under the tree. In another medal, there is a brass lamp with a chain above a boat, and over the chain a perpendicular *nandaka*, and on the two sides of the pillar, two branches of *śirīṣa* flowers. These two were the royal emblems of the rulers of the Kolattunādu territory of north Kerala of later times, who seem to have inherited the royal lineage of the Mūṣikavaṃśa.[4] Possibly, the rat myth was invented at quite early times due to the confusion of the meaning of the word *mūṣika*, which means both a rat and the *vāka* plant in Sanskrit.

Another problem related to the work is that it has lacunae at the beginning and at the end. The fact deprives us of an opportunity to learn any authorial statement regarding the aims of writing the work and the sources utilised by him in tracing the lineage as well as personal details related to him. The poem starts with the mythical genesis of the first king and the race itself and not much historical data are available from the existing account. As to the end, though it breaks off suddenly, not much seems remaining to be described as the account is about the reigning king with whom the poet was contemporaneous, as is evident from the consistent use of the present tense throughout there. It seems that the author, who was a court poet of Śrīkaṇṭha, the last king mentioned in the work, wanted to celebrate the race and lineage of his patron through the glorification of his ancestors and through tracing the lineage to the Hehaya kings of the lunar race, the rulers in a province in the Vindhya region of Central India. The work, thus, gives pan-Indian character to the lineage. It also authenticates the migration of the forefathers of the king by grafting the Paraśurāma myth to the consecration ceremony of the mythical founder, Rāmaghaṭa Mūṣika. M. G. S. Narayanan has pointed out that in the old Haihaya

[4] Raghavan Pillai 1977: 7. The information was originally contained in an article by Chirakkal Balakrishnan Nair in *Vijnanakairali*, Vols. 9 & 11.

country at the foot of the Vindhya, there is a hill called Ramghad, which contains a few painted caves, and Rāmaghaṭa must have signified this place, which was the original abode of the Mūṣikas.[5]

Yet another problem is related to the geographical identification of the places described in the poem. A lot of confusion seems to be generated by the fanciful *Keralotpatti* account (15th–16th centuries A.D.), wherein it is maintained that the dynasty belonged to the extreme South of Kerala. This was dispelled by the discovery of the work itself and scholars have since identified several places mentioned in the work in North Kerala.[6] Yet another problem is why such a dynastic lineage, if it existed at all, could be so thoroughly erased from the collective memory of the people of Kerala so as to leave no trace whatsoever until the discovery of the manuscripts of the work quite recently. Kunjunni Raja surmises that "there must have been cataclysmic changes in the Mūṣaka country not long after the time of Atula, which destroyed completely the entire kingdom; even the traditional history of the land was forgotten."[7] Be it as it may, the region witnessed the advent of the royal family of the Kolattiris by the beginnings of the seventeenth century, which apparently had no relation with the Mūṣikavaṃśa family, save the emblem of the plant mentioned above.[8]

In fact, *Mūṣikavaṃśa* seems to be an amalgam of fiction and facts narrated through a continuum, with the later cantos assuming more historicity and having lesser to do with supernatural and fanciful accounts in relation to the earlier portions. Probably, this is a tendency which it shares with other historical *kāvya*s, including the *Rājataraṅgiṇī* of Kalhaṇa, which is regarded as one of the most trustworthy specimens

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5 Narayanan 1970: 190–191.

6 Kunjunni Raja 1958: 52.

7 Kunjunni Raja 1958: 59.

8 The *Udayavarmacarita* of King Ravivarma of the Kola country, encompassing the territory of the Mūṣikas, written in the beginning of the16th century A.D., mentions King Keralavarman as the founder of the Kolattiri family. See: Kunjunni Raja 1958: 58.

of Sanskrit historiography. It is also a fact that the author was in possession of more historical data of the period proximate to him in comparison with the remote antiquity which was a matter of mythology and hearsay. A perusal of *Mūṣikavaṃśa* shows that it resembles other historical *kāvya*s, such as the *Rājataraṅgiṇī* of Kalhaṇa, in mixing fanciful elements with actual historical facts without any inhibition. However, the critical attitude which makes *Rājataraṅgiṇī* the finest historical *kāvya* of ancient India is not seen to that degree in *Mūṣikavaṃśa*, wherein the poet does not offer any critical remarks about the kings treated by him. The poem, true to the conventions of *mahākāvya*s, fulfils the requirements of elaborate descriptions of stock items such as the city and the sea. It is in the first few cantos of the poem that we find descriptions of mountains, military march, battle, seasons like spring and summer, moonrise and drinking festivals. The narration tapers into a matter of fact account of the kings succeeding Nandana, the son of Rāmaghaṭa. The last two kings, viz. Valabha II and Śrīkaṇṭha, are treated rather elaborately, as the poet has all the historical details still fresh in memory.

When we evaluate the *Mūṣikavaṃśa* as a historical poem, many facts alluded to in the poem which can be corroborated by external evidence enhance its value. Rāmaghaṭa Mūṣika himself has now been identified with Irāmakuḍamūvar, who, as per one of the inscriptions of the Cola King Rājakesarivarman Rājādhirāja I, was killed in battle by the former.[9] Now *Irāma* is equivalent to Rāma and *kuḍam* to *ghaṭa* (pot). Circumstantial evidence seems to suggest that Nandana, the son of Rāmaghaṭa, was none other than Nannan, a ruler of Elimalai mentioned in Sangham literature.[10] Many places of North Kerala can be identified following the descriptions of Atula. For example, the poet mentions that the famous Śiva temple at Cellur (13.51), identified with Perimcellur, was built by king Sutasoma.[11] Another Śiva temple, called Vaṭukeśvara

[9] Unni1980: 93.

[10] Unni 1980: 95.

[11] Kunjunni Raja points out that this fact is corroborated by the poet Nīlakaṇṭha in the seventeenth century through his Malayalam Campū work

temple, was established by Vaṭukavarman and at present it is known as Vaṭeśvara, located on the east of Valarpaṭṭaṇam. King Āryagupta is mentioned as having established Acalapattanam, 'the city of hill', which is at present identified as the Village Kunneru (in Malayalam, *kunnu* means a mountain), situated near the Eli mountain. King Rājavarman is said to have established a huge Jaina Vihāra. Valabhapaṭṭanam, a city constructed by Valabha II, is identified with modern Valarpaṭṭaṇam. Another town said to have been established by him near the Killā river is Mārāhi, identified with modern Māṭāyi. The place Ahiraṇeśvara (11.69, 15.39, 15.48) is identified with modern Pāppiniśśeri. Other places mentioned in the poem include Kolam (12.42), sometimes identified as Pantalayini Kollam of modern Kerala, Bhaṭasthalī (13.6., 13.9., 13.12., 13.18.), identified as modern Vaṭaśśeri, and Marupuram (13.26). The poem makes two references to Śrīmūlvāsa, which was either a Buddhist or Jaina monastery, as it is variously described as that belonging to Jina (12.96) and Sugata (14.25). The poem refers to King Vikramarāma rescuing the place from sea erosion by building a wall. Valabha II is said to have visited the shrine on his return from his unsuccessful expedition. The place has been identified as the sea shore west to modern Pallikkunnu, mentioned as Vihāradurga in the poem. Probably, one of the most interesting historical facts mentioned in the poem is the transition of the succession of kings from the patrilineal system to the matrilineal one at about the11th century. It is mentioned in the poem that Nandinī, the Cedi princess, the wife of Īśānavarman II, prayed to goddess Durgā that henceforth the sons of the women of her lineage alone should be the kings of the Mūṣika royal family and it was granted. Evidently, this story is grafted to the work to have divine sanction for the adoption of a local custom of succession to a dynasty following another convention of succession.

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called *Cellurnāthodayam*. See Kunjunni Raja 1958: 54f.

The mythical account of the origin of the Mūṣika race and the story of the first king consecrated by Paraśurāma may be attempts to give legitimacy to the race of Śrīkaṇṭha, the patron of the poet, whose forefathers have been described as the rulers of the Hehaya kingdom. Warder shows how the myth of Paraśurāma as the creator of the region of seven 'Konkaṇas', consisting of Pūrvāyata, Paryāyata, Ṭhaṇa, Paraṭhāṇa, Haiva, Tulu and Mala(ya) figure in one of the texts of *Mayūravarmacarita* of Bimnāha.[12] In the Kerala region, the myth has a different theme. Here, in the anonymous Keralotpatti, Paraśurāma is introduced as throwing his axe from Gokarṇa to Kanyākumārī to reclaim the land underneath the sea. The reclaimed regions are Tulu, Mūṣika, Kerala and Kūpaka. Atula's mention of Paraśurāma as the consecrator of the Mūṣika race, read in this context, signifies an attempt to integrate *kṣatriya*s and *brāhmaṇa*s. Other supernatural references in the work include the destruction of the rat by the wrathful glance of the queen, the metamorphosis of the rat into the Parvatapuruṣa, the gift of divine missiles by Rāma to Ghaṭamūṣika and the divine vision of the goddess Durgā experienced by Queen Nandinī, in which the goddess grants her the wish that the Mūṣika kingdom will pass on to the progeny of her line. These stories also have a function to perform. They are attempts to legitimatize the Mūṣika race and the matrilineal system of inheritance adopted by the race later.

The framework of *Mūṣikavaṃśa* becomes more intelligible to us when examined against the literary conventions of a *mahākāvya* of classical Sanskrit literature. It should be remembered that while writing *Mūṣikavaṃśa*, Atula was documenting history in Sanskrit medium, simultaneously writing a *mahākāvya*, satisfying the norms of classical poetry. An analysis of the work will lead us to appreciate how far the poet has adhered to the literary conventions of a *mahākāvya* in the composition of the work, as illustrated in the following table:

[12] Warder 1992: 31.

Item	**Context**	**Location (Canto)**
Formal beginning [benediction (*āśis*), salutation (*namaskriyā*) or a statement of fact (*vastunirdeśa*)]	No	No
City	Acalapattanam Mārāhi Valabhapaṭṭanam	xi xiv xiv
Mountain	Mount Eli being seen by Rāmaghaṭamūṣika	iii
Season (i)Autumn (ii)Spring (iii)Summer	 Rāmaghaṭamūṣika prepares for the conquest of four directions Being enjoyed by Nandana Being enjoyed by Nandana	 ii vii vii
Moonrise	Being enjoyed by Nandana	ix
Sunrise	Being enjoyed by Nandana	x
Sport in Park	No	No
Watersport	Nandana	viii
Drinking	Lovers in the kingdom of Nandana	x
Amorous festival	Nandana	viii
Separation	No	No
Marriage	Rāmaghaṭamūṣika marrying Bhadrasenā Īśānavarman marrying the Cedi princess	vi xii
Rise of a prince	Rāmaghaṭamūṣika	ii

Item	**Context**	**Location (Canto)**
Strategic discussion	Between Mahānāvika and Rāmaghaṭamūṣika	iv
Messenger	Sent by Rāmaghaṭamūṣika to the court of Magadha	v
Military march	Rāmaghaṭamūṣika	v
Battle	Rāmaghaṭamūṣika vs King of Magadha Kuñcivarman vs Raghupati, King of Kerala Valabha vs Vikramarāma	vi xii xiv
Victory of the King	Rāmaghaṭamūṣika	vi

The lacunae in the text deprive us of the opportunity to understand the real beginning of the *kāvya*, ie. whether it was in the form of benediction (*āśis*), salutation (*namaskriyā*) or a statement of fact (*vastunirdeśa*). While descriptions themselves tend to be more conventional and stereotyped than realistic, we do find some very interesting exceptions wherein the poet shows great skill of observation and eschews the tendency to mechanically follow standard descriptions found elsewhere. Let us take, for example, the typically local sights accosting king Rāmaghaṭamūṣika in the vicinity of the city of Kolam, featuring trees and plants of the locality.

> The King saw bananas on the outskirts of Kolā
> with their leaves like hand waved in the wind
> As if wishing to obtain some support
> when they were exhausted by their excessive loads of fruit.
> The Lord of the Earth rejoiced abundantly in villages
> at the scents of the splitting buds indicating the blossoms
> Of groves of betel and forests of coconut,
> suddenly brought by the wind.[13]

[13] *Mūṣikavaṃśa*, II.56–57. The translations are of A. K. Warder (Warder 1992: 35).

However, generally, as in the case of the Eli mountain, the poet follows the convention by describing it as having peaks covered with snow like the Himālayas. Many other descriptions, such as those of spring, moonrise, water-sport and amorous sport, are mainly for the fulfilment of the requirements of a *sargabandha* and no contextual requirements seem to necessitate them. On the other hand, the political items which are supposed to be the structural elements of the *mahākavya*, such as the description of the messenger, birth of a prince, march and battles, are very much an integral part of the narration. Thus, Atula describes how a messenger of Rāmaghaṭamūṣika goes to the court of the king of Magadha and warns him of the consequences of a war. The battles between Rāmaghaṭamūṣika and the king of Magadha and between Kuñcivarman and Raghupati as well as the birth of Rāmaghaṭamūṣika are the cases in point.

From all the above remarks, one can clearly see that the poet Atula reworked the historical facts about the lineage, which were at his disposal, to fashion a narrative in the classical mould similarly to the *Raghuvamśa* so as to represent local history in the Sanskrit language, which was undergoing the process of entrenchment in the court culture of Kerala. Roughly two centuries before the poet, Kerala had already witnessed the blossoming of Sanskrit literature through the works of Kulaśekhara of Mahodayapura, who, apart from being a great patron of Sanskrit, had composed the two dramas of *Subhadrādhanañjaya* and *Tapatīsaṃvaraṇa*. The philosopher Śaṅkarācārya and the playwright Śaktibhadra lived even earlier than him, though the former seems to have composed his works outside Kerala. Thus, Atula had a clear cut task before him: to represent local history in a language of pan-Indian prestige. It seems that he had to sanskritize the spelling of both the personal names and place names in the vernacular while writing his poem. There is no reason to doubt the identification of King Rāmaghaṭamūṣika with Irāmakuḍamūvar and Nandana with Nannan. The Sanskrit terms used to denote these kings in the poem are paralleled by the Sanskrit place names used throughout the work to represent local place names. There seems to be no doubt

that the process undertaken was the sanskritization of local history. Also, the poet seems to have consciously tried to uphold the pan-Indian roots of the lineage with frequent references to its link with kingdoms such as the Hehayas and Cedis and Magadha and references to conquests outside the region comprising the west coast.

To conclude, it may be reiterated that a study of *Mūṣikavaṃśa* proves to be extremely interesting as a case study of traditional Indian historiography. Here, one can see an attempt to represent regional history using conventions of classical poetry. The reigning kings of the dynasty are, thus, meaningfully linked with their pan-Indian tradition. Though the local touch is not altogether excluded, the accent of the work has been placed on the ideal life of kings as portrayed in works dealing with kings in classical Sanskrit poetry.

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