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Embracing Simultaneity: The Story of *Śleṣa* in South Asia

In memory of Fred Bronner, a kind, wise and loving father.
1925 (Cracow) – 2013 (Jerusalem).

SUMMARY: This essay deals with literary works that combine two or more topics, characters, or plotlines and convey them concurrently to their respective destinations. It is based on my monograph *Extreme Poetry: The South Asian Movement of Simultaneous Narration* (Bronner 2010), where I discuss this phenomenon at length. Here I will limit myself briefly to presenting three main points: that the dimensions of the *śleṣa* phenomenon in South Asia are enormous, that experiments with artistic simultaneity have a demonstrable and meaningful history, and that this is the history of a self-conscious literary movement. I conclude with three brief examples of *śleṣa* verses from three very different works that exemplify some of the poetic uses to which *śleṣa* was put and that demonstrate how the literary movement under discussion used *śleṣa* to advance the aesthetic projects of South Asian culture and push them to the extreme.

KEYWORDS: *śleṣa*, polysemy, simultaneity, Kavirāja, Subandhu, Nītivarman, Daṇḍin, Jagaddhara Bhaṭṭa, Māgha, Śrīharṣa.

There is a story about a man taking a night train from Mumbai to Delhi. It was a sleeper coach and he had reserved the upper berth, which he happily inhabited during the first hours of the journey. At one of the many stations along the way, the weary traveler alighted from the train to get a cup of chai. While he was taking his time at the tea

stall, his train left, and another took its place on the platform. This other train was going in the opposite direction, from Delhi to Mumbai. The unsuspecting traveler noticed none of this: he finished drinking his chai and embarked on the second train. He was surprised to find "his" sleeper occupied, but luckily, there was an empty berth beneath it, which he quickly occupied, and the train left the station. For a while the passenger relaxed in his sleeper, but eventually he began to feel that something was not in order. He turned to his neighbor and asked, just to be on the safe side, where they were heading. "Mumbai," came the answer. Puzzled, the man thought for a long while. Finally he broke his silence: "How amazing is modern technology! In the very same train, the upper sleeper travels to Delhi and the lower to Mumbai."[1]

This essay deals with literary trains that combine—the technical term for this in Sanskrit is *śleṣa*, or "embrace"—two or more topics, characters, or plotlines and convey them concurrently to their respective destinations, or targets. It is based on my monograph *Extreme Poetry: The South Asian Movement of Simultaneous Narration* (Bronner 2010), where I discuss this phenomenon at length. Here I will limit myself briefly to presenting three main points: that the dimensions of the *śleṣa* phenomenon in South Asia are enormous, that experiments with artistic simultaneity have a demonstrable and meaningful history, and that this is the history of a self-conscious literary movement. I conclude with three brief examples of *śleṣa* verses from three very different works that exemplify some of the poetic uses to which *śleṣa* was put and that demonstrate how the literary movement under discussion used *śleṣa* to advance the aesthetic projects of South Asian culture and push them to the extreme.

[1] A. K. Ramanujan told this story as part of a talk titled "Is there an Indian Way of Thinking?" (Jerusalem, Israel, 1991). An essay with the same title in Ramanujan (1999) omits the story. The probable original version, "Vaijnanik Bhyabachaka," is by the Bengali author Shibram Chakrabarti (*Shibram Rachana Samagra* of Shibram Chakrabarti, 1985: 48–54). I am indebted to Kunal Chakrabarti for this reference.

Dimensions

It is hard to exaggerate the size of the *śleṣa* phenomenon in South Asia. First, it features prominently in virtually all genres of Sanskrit literature (*kāvya*): standalone verses (*muktaka*), short versified poems (such as *khaṇḍakāvya* and the extremely popular genre of messenger poems, or *dūtakāvya*), anthologies (from the level of the *śataka* on), full-length narrative poems (*mahākāvya*), art-prose works (*gadya*, where *śleṣa* seems particularly frequent), works that mix verse and prose (*campū*), hymns and collections thereof (the vast *stotra* literature), public poetry inscribed on stone or copper plates (*praśasti*, another area where *śleṣa* is particularly prevalent), poetic riddles (*prahelikā*), and even stage plays: the scripts of Sanskrit dramas have numerous instances of *śleṣa* verses, often at key plot junctions, and at least a few plays exist that were designed to present two simultaneous stories from beginning to end.

Second, Sanskrit is not alone. *Śleṣa* appears abundantly in many other South Asian languages. I will mention here only a few: Dakhni, Old Hindi, the various Prakrits, Tamil, and Telugu. The last two languages from the southern part of the subcontinent are particularly noteworthy because each developed its own, highly productive set of *śleṣa*-dominated genres, whose dimensions were commensurate with those found in Sanskrit.[2] This may be true also of other South Asian literary cultures; although *śleṣa* in the poetic corpora of languages such as Sinhala, Malayalam, Old Bengali, and Indo-Persian needs further probing, there is good reason to believe that it was quite prominent there too.

Third, linguistic simultaneity is achieved in South Asia through a large variety of linguistic techniques, often with diverse cognitive and experiential effects. Thus we have poems that narrate not just two but three, five, or even seven concurrent stories; works wherein each verse yields one meaning when it is read normally from beginning to end

[2] See Bronner 2010: 137–138 (for Tamil) and 132–137 and 273–276 (for Telugu).

and an altogether different meaning when it is read backward from the end to the beginning (*vilomakāvya*); extended poetic palindromes; works that communicate a single narrative in two (or more) languages concurrently or narrate two simultaneous stories, each in a different language (both categories are labeled *bhāṣāśleṣa* by Sanskrit literary theorists); works that tell a story and at the same time consistently illustrate the rules of grammar or another discipline (*dvyāśrayakāvya*); and dialogical works where the seemingly straightforward lines of one speaker are repeatedly reread and reinterpreted to mean something totally different by another (the *vakrokti* genre).

Fourth, *śleṣa* is used to couple an amazing variety of topics, characters, and plotlines. We find poems that copraise pairs of gods (Śiva and Viṣṇu, for example) or saints (such as the different Jain Tīrthaṅkaras), conarrate opposites, as in the case of sensual love and asceticism, codepict the guise of a character and his or her true identity (the best-known example of this is Śrīharṣa's *Naiṣadhīya*, in which simultaneous language is used to portray Nala and the four gods who take his guise in order to win Damayantī's hand), use the existence of a second, subtler linguistic register to express political criticism and other subversive themes (including pornography), and, most famously, tell two stories simultaneously, whether traditional, new, or a combination thereof. Indeed, *śleṣa* proved particularly adaptive to modern topics in South Asia, such as the life of historical figures, the story of Jesus, Gandhi's struggle for independence, and the new commodity of tobacco, to give a few examples from nineteenth- and twentieth-century *śleṣa* literature in Tamil and Telugu.[3]

Fifth, simultaneous expression or narration is found in media other than the linguistic one. Quite a few cases of śleṣa are demonstrable in sculpture, carvings, paintings, temple iconography, and architecture throughout the Indian subcontinent and in Southeast Asia. Art historians have given this topic considerable attention.[4] There are

[3] Bronner 2010: 137–138.

[4] Consider, for example, Desai 1987; Meister 1979; and Rabe 2001.

also instances of experiments with simultaneity in Indian classical music (as in works that are in two concurrent ragas), to say nothing of the aforementioned dual dramatic representations on stage. We know from the great Sanskrit intellectual and connoisseur Abhinavagupta that actors were trained to convey the two parts simultaneously by presenting one part with their bodily gestures and another with their facial expressions.[5]

Finally, *śleṣa* was the subject of a vast secondary literature in South Asia, primarily in Sanskrit. Here I mention two particularly rich professional discourses: first, that of Sanskrit poetics, where *śleṣa* was identified, named, defined as a specific "ornament of speech" (*alaṃkāra*), and analyzed at great length for well over a millennium and arguably ended up becoming the "most discussed *alaṃkāra*";[6] second, the large corpus of help books and lexicons listing synonyms, words with alternative spellings, monosyllabic vocabularies that are particularly prone to polysemy, and stretches of sounds that could be segmented into words in more than one way, all of which catered primarily (albeit not exclusively) to the needs of *śleṣa* poets and readers. The impressive output of such theoretical and practical *śleṣa* materials (sometimes with the word *śleṣa* in their title) is commensurate with the literary and artistic output and indicative of its immense dimensions.[7] Although all cultures experimented with puns, palindromes, and *śleṣa*-like phenomena, the South Asian case clearly stands out, if only in terms of the sheer size of the output and the intensity of the fascination.

[5] Abhinavagupta notes this apropos of a *śleṣa* verse in one of Harṣa's plays (pp. 226–227 in the *Dhvanyāloka* of Ānandavardhana; cf. Ingalls, Masson and Patwardhan 1990: 278–279).

[6] Raghavan 1978: 371. For an overview of the discussions of *śleṣa* in Sanskrit literary theory, see Bronner 2010: 195–230.

[7] Bronner 2010: 128–132.

History

The prevalent notion among most modern critics is that this vast and unique cultural phenomenon somehow lies outside history. Polysemy is widely believed to be an innate feature of Sanskrit, a language that is supposed to be, by nature, uniquely prone to morphology, syntax, and, most important, lexicon that lend themselves to ambiguities. (One obvious problem with this belief is that the same must be true of Telugu and Tamil, although these are very different languages from an altogether different family.) Thus it is deemed that instances of deliberate simultaneity were always present in Sanskrit. But the very same people who maintain that *śleṣa* in Sanskrit is natural and eternal also believe that the full-scale *śleṣa* found in works such as the large poems that simultaneously narrate the two great Sanskrit epics, the *Rāmāyaṇa* and the *Mahābhārata*, "does not connect itself with any tradition earlier than the 11th century."[8] In short, *śleṣa* was always there, but nevertheless, it was also absent when and where it really mattered, namely, the "classical" period of the first millennium, and when it finally appeared, it did so out of the blue, outside any historical context. Both its constant presence and its sudden late appearance, moreover, seem not to need any explanation, the first because it was decreed by nature, and the second, presumably, simply because it was late.

These strange stances are primarily rooted in the still-strong anti-*śleṣa* bias, a topic that is beyond the scope of this essay.[9] But as soon as such biases are discarded, the stages and phases in the history of *śleṣa* in South Asia can begin to manifest themselves. For one thing, this history has a marked beginning. Despite the prevalent opinion, instances of poetic simultaneity are very rare in the early specimens of *kāvya* literature: *śleṣa* is scarce in the *Rāmāyaṇa*, which the tradition holds to be the first or primordial poem (*ādikāvya*); it is still infrequent

[8] Dasgupta and De 1962: 339; see also Lienhard 1984: 224.

[9] See Bronner 2010: 9–13.

in the earliest extant works of versified *kāvya* proper, such as the poems and plays of Aśvaghoṣa (second century CE); and even in the works of Kālidāsa (late fourth or fifth century), who certainly was no stranger to semantic excess, its instances are few and far between. It is only around the sixth century CE, in works such as Bhāravi's *Kirātārjunīya*, that we find *śleṣa* as a prominent feature in versified *kāvya*. A similar picture emerges from the corpus of public poetry of inscriptions: *śleṣa* is virtually absent from the famous Junāgaṛh epigraph of Rudradāman in the second century CE and is still used sparsely even in the highly ornate eulogy of Samudragupta, inscribed in the fourth century on the Allahabad Pillar by the poet Hariṣeṇa. Again, it is only in the sixth century that *śleṣa* comes to dominate the inscriptional *praśasti* style.[10]

It thus seems clear that the sixth century was a turning point for the use of simultaneity in Sanskrit literature. Strong support for this view comes from the *Vāsavadattā*, Subandhu's pioneering prose-art work. Here is what Subandhu tells us about himself and his composition in its concluding, signature verse (which, in some editions, is found as the concluding verse of his short introduction):

> *sarasvatī-datta-vara-prasādaś cakre subandhus sujanâikabandhuḥ* |
> *pratyakṣara-śleṣa-maya-prapañca-vinyāsa-vaidagdha-nidhiṃ prabandham* ||
> (*Vāsavadattā*, p. 159)

> Graced by Sarasvatī's gift of clarity,
> I, Subandhu, the sole soul mate
> of people of good taste,
> was empowered to complete this composition.
> It is a treasure of crafty configuration—
> an entire constellation
> that consists of *śleṣa*
> in letter after letter.

[10] On *śleṣa* in inscriptions, see Brocquet 1996.

Much can be said about this verse, which showcases the various components of Subandhu's revolutionary style: the bold use of long compounds, as in the one taking almost the entire second line of the verse; the rich score of sound effects, rhymes, and alliterations running throughout both lines; and wordplays and, indeed, a *śleṣa* on the word Sarasvatī, both as a river and as the goddess of poetry, whose gift of clarity is therefore of two concurrent types. But for my purposes it should be clear that Subandhu is announcing here, for the first time in the known history of *kāvya* literature, a new poetic vision with *śleṣa* as its dominant compositional mode "in letter after letter." It is perhaps not a coincidence that this is where we find the term *śleṣa* for the first time (although Subandhu uses it as a familiar designation), and it is clear that Subandhu wants his name (which he mentions nowhere else in the work) to be associated with this groundbreaking employment of *śleṣa*, his main source of pride.

I do not have space here to discuss in detail the nature of Subandhu's fascinating experiments with *śleṣa*; I can say only that he often used it in the long prose descriptive passages of the *Vāsavadattā* to play with Sanskrit's by-now-familiar conventions and clichés and to defamiliarize them in surprising and sometimes comic ways.[11] Such uses of *śleṣa* for the estrangement of conventions became a stable feature of Sanskrit prose style, as can be seen already in the works of Bāṇa, Subandhu's great follower and admirer. Even if Bāṇa tended to domesticate Subandhu's more subversive puns and use them in the service of his poetic eulogy of his political patron, King Harṣa (r. 606–647), he continued massively to experiment with its capacities, often in ways that echoed his pioneering predecessor.[12]

Once tested in the prose labs of Subandhu and Bāṇa, *śleṣa* emerged as an extremely popular feature of *kāvya*'s various forms: verse and

[11] For a detailed discussion of Subandhu's *śleṣa*, see Bronner 2010: 20–50.

[12] For a brief discussion of Bāṇa's response to Subandhu, see Bronner 2010: 50–56. For Subandhu's use of compounds, see Bronner, forthcoming.

prose, political and fictional, read and staged. Perhaps the most discernible trend of the seventh century was the transformation of *śleṣa* into a plot device in narrative poems and plays, where simultaneous language was used to depict or give voice to characters working under assumed identities and to a whole cast of emissaries and go-betweens whose speech is inherently equivocal. The "embraced" depictions or dialogues varied in length, as befitted the plots of their respective works. In the plays of King Harṣa (Bāṇa's patron) and, a bit later, in Bhavabhūti's drama *Mālatīmādhava* (early eighth century), for example, *śleṣa* is used in short speeches among lovers who can barely disguise their love. But in Māgha's famous *Śiśupālavadha*, one of the most cherished works in the history of *kāvya*, we find a simultaneous oration that runs fourteen full stanzas (*Śiśupālavadha* 16.2–15). It consists of the speech of a political emissary sent to Kṛṣṇa by his nemesis Śiśupāla that embraces a peace offer with a declaration of war.[13] And in the *Kīcakavadha* of Nītivarman (probably fl. ca. 600), a work dedicated to the undercover exploits of the epic heroes, *śleṣa* speeches and descriptions make up much of the text.[14] But regardless of their scope, all these instances of simultaneous speech are key events in their respective plots and are often discussed as such by the other dramatis personae. I believe that their centrality is closely related to the fact that *śleṣa* enabled the process by which disguised, conflicted, or dual characters were becoming themselves in these works. This argument will, I hope, become clearer when I look at one example from the *Kīcakavadha* later in this essay.

The uses of *śleṣa* continued to evolve. No doubt the most dramatic innovation of the eighth century was the invention of a new genre of narrative poems dedicated to the simultaneous narration of the two Sanskrit epics, the *Rāmāyaṇa* and the *Mahābhārata*. Despite the aforementioned attempts of Indologists to push this genre

[13] For Māgha's *śleṣa*, see Bronner 2010: 79–82; and Bronner and McCrea 2012.

[14] Bronner 2010: 58–78.

to the second millennium CE, the earliest known example of this type is by the famous author and theoretician Daṇḍin (fl. ca. 700 CE).[15] It has been suggested that one of Daṇḍin's inspirations for composing such an unusual work was the great narrative relief in the Pallava port city of Mahabalipuram (Mammalapuram), which itself allows two concurrent interpretations,[16] although the literary experiments with *śleṣa* in the preceding decades must have been just as important. Daṇḍin's pioneering *śleṣa* work is now lost except for a single verse that the literary theorist King Bhoja cited in the eleventh century as an example of what by then was already a thriving genre. Indeed, Bhoja connected the full-scale dual narrative works to the smaller-scale attempts of Māgha and Nītivarman. He dubbed the genre "aiming at two targets" (*dvisandhānakāvya*), which is also the name of a second work he cites, by the Jain author Dhanañjaya (ca. 800 CE). This massive, ambitious work, which tries to embrace the great epic plots together with various Jain traditions, is fully extant and allows many insights into a relatively early phase in the evolution of simultaneous narration in South Asia.[17]

New uses of simultaneity continued to appear—one example is the ninth-century corpus of the poet Ratnākara, which highlights, among other things, complex multilingual *śleṣa* (in his *Haravijaya*) and the genre of "distortive talk" (in his *Vakroktipañcāśikā*)—but it was the conarration of the epics that became the dominant application of *śleṣa* during the first centuries of the second millennium CE. Here we find a considerable number of full-scale poems that narrate either the epics of the Brahmin tradition or the stories of the Jain saints and even combine the exploits of mythic heroes with those of historical figures (see the *Rāmacarita* of Sandhyākaranandin, the topic of Brocquet's research in Brocquet 2010 and elsewhere). It is in this period that we also find the most popular work of the genre, the celebrated

[15] For Daṇḍin's dates, see Bronner 2012. For a discussion of his lost work, see Bronner 2010: 99–102.

[16] Rabe 2001: 82, 115.

[17] Bronner 2010: 102–121.

Rāghavapāṇḍavīya of Kavirāja (ca. 1175), a verse from which I will sample shortly. And this is also the period when, not surprisingly, special lexicons, thesauri, and other wordbooks that catered to the needs of *śleṣa* poets and readers flourished. This *śleṣa* boom coincided with the vernacularization of South Asia—the process by which vernacular languages asserted themselves as Sanskrit's equals and began to develop their own canons of belletristic works. It may well be that the great investment in simultaneous narration was the response of Sanskrit writers to the vernacular revolution, as Pollock called it: an attempt to invest in literary projects where Sanskrit still held an advantage over upstart languages.[18]

A second *śleṣa* boom took place in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, this time mostly confined to the southern part of the Indian peninsula and coinciding with the incorporation of *śleṣa* by Telugu and Tamil authors. These two southern languages, it should be noted, adopted *śleṣa* massively, although each with a different approach. Telugu writers took the genre of double-epic or dual-targeted poetry of Sanskrit authors such as Daṇḍin, Dhanañjaya, and, most famously, Kavirāja and dramatically expanded its range of possibilities. Tamil poets, by contrast, made *śleṣa* the dominant compositional mode of Tamil-specific genres, such as the immensely popular *cilēṭai* (*śleṣa*) *veṇpā* and *vilācam*. Sanskrit poets in this region reacted to these developments by entering a three-way literary competition in which they accelerated their own experiments with simultaneity. For example, it may not be a coincidence that the Sanskrit author Sūryadāsa (fl. ca. 1580 CE) created the first full-scale bidirectional poem—which narrates the tale of Nala when read in one direction and that of Hariścandra when read in the other—just at the time when an anonymous Telugu author "embraced" these two narratives for the first time in a work that is "merely" bitextual (*Nalahariścandrīya*). *Śleṣa* works,

[18] For the argument about vernacularization, see Pollock 2006. For *śleṣa* in this context, see Bronner 2010: 132–139.

especially in Telugu and Tamil, continued to be composed in the South well into the modern era, as I mentioned in the previous section.

A Self-Conscious Movement

These literary developments, whose history I have only schematically sketched, were not sporadic and unrelated. Rather, they represent the efforts of a self-conscious avant-garde movement that constantly tried to push literature to its limits. The poets I have mentioned connected themselves to their predecessors, both implicitly and explicitly, and took special pride in the extremity of their collective experimentation. An example of this connectedness is the constant pattern of lineage making that links the various historical phases sketched earlier. The *Vāsavadattā* of Subandhu, the great pioneer of *śleṣa*, is praised by Bāṇa, his successor in the field of *śleṣa*-dominated prose. Kavirāja declares that both Subandhu and Bāṇa are his pair of role models on the path of "crooked speech," and the thirteenth-century *śleṣa* writer Vidyāmādhava already speaks of all three of them as his triad of masters. The lineage continues into the early modern era and across languages: Telugu *śleṣa* poets such as Piṅgaḷi Sūranna present Kavirāja as their inspiration.[19]

Another pattern of associating with the *śleṣa* movement is that of either titling dual-targeted or multitargeted works according to the number of their targets, as in *dvisandhāna* (bitarget), *trisandhāna* (tritarget) or even *saptasandhāna* (septatarget) poems, or naming them after their main characters, as in *Rāghavapāṇḍavīya* (*On Rāghava and Pāṇḍava*), *Rāghavayādavīya* (*On Rāghava and Yādava*), *Pārvatīrukmiṇīya* (*On Pārvatī and Rukmiṇī*), or the aforementioned *Nalahariścandrīya* (*On Nala and Hariścandra*). There were, of course, numerous subtler echoes meant for the eyes (or ears) of the intended, well-versed reader. Think, in this context, of the imagery used by *śleṣa* writers to describe their unique accomplishments: if the famous Kavirāja, for example, compared his merging of the two great epics to the sage Bhagīratha's

[19] Bronner 2010: 234–235.

bringing the river Gaṅgā (*Rāmāyaṇa*) to the ocean (*Mahābhārata*), it is no mere coincidence that the aforementioned Sūryadāsa compared his bidirectional poem to another incredible but unprecedented feat involving one of India's great rivers: reversing the course of the Godāvarī and making it suddenly flow uphill.[20]

Indeed, extended moments of self-reflection on simultaneity, its technical aspects, and its powerful accomplishments are quite common in the long history of the *śleṣa* movement and indicate, more than anything else, the shared feeling of its participants: the achievement of a unique victory over language (rather than succumbing to one of its "natural" features). A straight line connects Subandhu's celebration of his work as "an entire constellation / that consists of *śleṣa* / in letter after letter" in the sixth century to Piṅgaḷi Sūranna's prideful claim of achieving the same in Telugu about a millennium later.[21] There are many such instances, and the overall sentiment is that extended simultaneity is "the very life breath of articulate speech" (*vāgvaikharījīvitam*), as Śeṣācalapati, another *śleṣa* poet from the early modern era, put it.[22] The idea that the composition of *śleṣa* works is the acme of literary erudition and virtuosity is found also among emic theoreticians and critics, whose reaction to such flashy devices as *śleṣa* was otherwise sometimes ambivalent. Thus Rudraṭa, the important Kashmiri thinker from the ninth century, stated that "only once he has attained a complete and perfect command of grammar, read the corpus of poetic practice, learned the vernacular languages, and taken great pains to master the vast variety of wordbooks, should the gifted, great poet attempt to compose in *śleṣa*."[23] One may think of such statements as a warning to *śleṣa* authors in the making about the necessary prerequisites and also as praise for the achievements of the group of *śleṣa* authors, but in any case, they again confirm the existence of such a conscious, distinct

[20] Bronner 2010: 126–127.

[21] See the discussion in Bronner 2010: 134–135, 235.

[22] Bronner 2010: 127–128.

[23] *Kāvyālaṃkāra* of Rudraṭa 4.35; cf. Bronner 2010: 129.

group. In this connection it is worth noting that the title "*śleṣa*-poet" (*śleṣa-kavi*) is attested and self-claimed in literature (this, for example, is how the gander dubs Damayantī after she cleverly uses a *śleṣa* verse in the famous *Naiṣadhacarita* of Śrīharṣa, clearly one of the tradition's greatest *śleṣa* poets), and that in the later tradition we know of poets who claimed even more bombastic titles, such as "tiger of *śleṣa*" (*cilēṭaippuli*) in the case of the Tamil author Vēmpattūr Piccuvaiyar.[24]

Extreme Poetry: Examples of *Śleṣa* in Practice

Clearly, this movement's sense of pride derives partly from the sheer display of virtuosity inherent in the feat of simultaneous expression and in the sense of triumph over the constraints of language.[25] But this is only the beginning. As I have noted, the long-standing experimentation with *śleṣa* constantly strove to push central goals of *kāvya*'s literary project to their limit and, in doing so, to advance this project as a whole. I will try to exemplify this with respect to three such poetic ideals: reworking and refining the great Sanskrit epics, enabling characters to become themselves, and giving voice to the ideals of devotional bhakti, with its rich, inherent paradoxes.

Sidestepping chronological order, I begin with an example from the most celebrated figure in the *śleṣa* movement, the poet Kavirāja (literally, "king of poets"). Here is a verse from his vast bitextual work, the *Rāghavapāṇḍavīya*, which tells the *Rāmāyaṇa*'s tale of Rāma and his brothers and, at the same time, the *Mahābhārata*'s story of the Pāṇḍava brothers. The Sanskrit is followed by two parallel translations, each befitting the reading demanded by one of these narratives:

> *tato hanūmān vijayāṅkabhūtasvareṇa ghoreṇa nadan pareṣām |*
> *lāṅgūlalagnena hutāśanena dadāha laṅkām iva cittavṛttim ||*
> (*Rāghavapāṇḍavīya* of Kavirāja, 6.20)

[24] *Naiṣadhacarita* 3.69. For a discussion of the notion of a *śleṣa* poet, see Bronner 2010: 234–239.

[25] Bronner 2010: 239–242.

[*Rāmāyaṇa* reading:]	[*Mahābhārata* reading:]
Then Hanūmān sounded his terrifying	Then Hanūmān sounded his terrifying
roar of victory and burned down Laṅkā	roar from Arjuna's ensign and scorched
with Fire riding his tail, as if scorching	the hearts of his enemies, as once he
his enemies' hearts.	burned down Laṅkā with Fire riding his tail.

The section in the poem from which this verse is taken conarrates the *Rāmāyaṇa*'s *Sundarakāṇḍa*, where the monkey Hanūmān discovers the whereabouts of the captive Sītā and returns to report to Rāma, still an exile in the forest, with the *Mahābhārata*'s *Virāṭaparvan*, where Arjuna and his brothers live in disguise—the final stipulation of their long exile. In examining the example, it is important to note, first, how relatively light its use of polysemy is. The only true homonym here is *vijaya*, which refers to Hanūmān's "victory" in the *Rāmāyaṇa* register and is used as an epithet for Arjuna in the *Mahābhārata*.[26] This almost seamless linguistic embrace throws light on the close parallels between and hence easy embrace of the *Sundarakāṇḍa* and the *Vīrāṭaparvan*: both narrate the last year of exile of their respective heroes, both involve a humiliation of the female protagonist (Sītā at the hands of her captor Rāvaṇa, Draupadī at the hands of her molester Kīcaka), both feature a further humiliation of the male protagonists in connection with the women's plight (Hanūmān is captured after discovering Sītā and is marched through town by Rāvaṇa's soldiers, his tail set on fire; the heroic warrior Arjuna—and later his brother Bhīma—

[26] The word *aṅka* is also used somewhat differently in the two readings. On the *Mahābhārata* side, it refers to Arjuna's ensign or banner, on which Hanūmān is located. In the *Rāmāyaṇa* reading, it signifies how the roar was a "sign" or symbol of victory.

are disguised as women on Draupadī's behalf), and both Hanūmān and Arjuna single-handedly defeat their enemies, as depicted in this verse.

Moreover, both feature the same character. Hanūmān, who in the *Rāmāyaṇa* uses his burning tail to raze the entire city of Laṅkā, reappears in many versions of the *Mahābhārata* on Arjuna's ensign (hoisted as the final step of the hero's self-revelation) and becomes an active participant in the battle. Indeed, both possible readings of this Sanskrit verse are explicitly compared with each other, only that the subject and the standard of the simile are rotated, a signature technique of Kavirāja that he lists in the introduction to his poem. The result is a powerful thematization of the reverberation between the two epics as we hear the same roar echoed on both sides of the bitextual divide. Generations of Sanskrit poets reworked the materials of one epic, often with an eye to the other, in a process that begins with the epics themselves. But what we see here, in this one simple example, is a powerful poetic meditation on the tight intertextual resonance between the tradition's two founding works.

My second example is probably a few centuries older. The *Kīcakavadha* (*Killing Kīcaka*) of Nītivarman also deals with the *Mahābhārata*'s *Virāṭaparvan*, where Draupadī, disguised as a maidservant of Virāṭa's queen, is harassed by Kīcaka (the queen's brother and the strongman in Virāṭa's court). After this incident, she runs to the king's assembly, where her five husbands, the epic protagonists, are working under cover. She complains bitterly to Virāṭa about the actions of Kīcaka, supposedly his subordinate, but her speech is simultaneously addressed to the ears of her husbands, for which purpose *śleṣa* is particularly suitable. On the simplest and most basic level, resorting to *śleṣa* allows Draupadī to engage her husbands in conversation without revealing their secret identity (and their relation to her) too soon. But as we shall see, her dual speech is far more consequential. Take, for example, a verse in which she addresses King Virāṭa and her favorite husband Bhīma. Again, the Sanskrit verse is followed by two parallel translations:

pātāśūrosṛjas tasya madaṅgajavimardinaḥ |
siṃhasyeva mṛgaḥ kṣudras tvaṃ kila svayam īdṛśaḥ || (*Kīcakavadha* 3.28)

[To Virāṭa:]	[To Bhīma:]
You're a protector! A hero! Yet surely	You'll soon drink blood from the thigh
you created his [Kīcaka's] arrogance.	of him who grabbed me by my hair.
For you act as if you were a pathetic deer	Sure! Just like a pathetic deer would
and he an elephant-crushing lion.	[drink blood] off a lion.

The technique that enables simultaneity here is quite different from what we have seen in the previous example and depends, in the first half of the verse, on crafting an utterance that can be differently carved up into words. To Virāṭa, Draupadī's words remind him of his role as a protector (*pātā*) and a hero (*śūro*) who generated (*'sṛjas*, here as a second person past-tense verb) the arrogance (*madaṅ*) of his servant, now elevated to the unthinkable position of an elephant-crushing (*gaja-vimardinaḥ*) lion. But to Bhīma, she speaks of his earlier oath quickly (*āśu*) to drink (*pātā*, a form derivable from the two homophonous roots *pā*, "to protect" and "to drink") blood (*'sṛjas*, the genitive singular of *asṛj*, "blood") from the thigh (*ūru*) of the man "who grabbed me by my hair" (*mad-aṅga-ja-virmardinaḥ*).

The hocus-pocus of resegmentation—dividing a single utterance into two sets of signifiers based on Sanskrit rules of euphonic combination (*sandhi*) and other morphological ambiguities—allows Draupadī to refer to two different episodes, depending on her intended listener, and to convey two very different affects. When she is speaking to Virāṭa, she boldly but respectfully demands justice as a servant who has been attacked in his court. But when she is speaking to her disguised husband, she sarcastically mocks his oath to take revenge for her earlier molestation at the hands of Duḥśāsana, an even more humiliating incident that eventually led to her current miserable state.

Both incidents and affects are then accentuated in the second half of the verse by the single image of the pathetic deer and the mighty lion: for Virāṭa, it suggests the inverted hierarchy that he has helped create and is now asked to reverse; but it scathingly scorns the situation of Bhīma, formerly the world's greatest wrestler, who now serves as a paltry cook in Virāṭa's kitchen.

Many things can be said about this *śleṣa* verse and the longer passage from which it is taken. Here I will limit myself to two main points. First, the verse and the passage as a whole consistently highlight the close structural parallels between two episodes within the same epic: the humiliation Draupadī suffers at the hands of Duḥśāsana in front of her family in the *Sabhāparvan* (the second book of the *Mahābhārata*) and the one she suffers later at the hands of Kīcaka in Virāṭa's court (in the *Virāṭaparvan*). Note that highlighting this intraepic similarity serves a somewhat different purpose than the interepic *śleṣa* of Kavirāja. Here the *śleṣa*-revealed similarities showcase the Virāṭa episode as an epic epicenter that repeats earlier losses (and, as Nītivarman later shows through *śleṣa* and other devices, also foregrounds later victories) in a condensed and refined manner.[27] Second, and not unrelated, as a result of her repeated humiliation and through the linguistic disguise of *śleṣa*, Draupadī is gradually allowed to emerge from her assumed, frozen, and fragmented identity and resume her true, holistic, and dynamic self. Note, for example, that in the public register of her *śleṣa* she still sounds like a humble, albeit angry, chambermaid, seeking protection and demanding that good order be reinstated, but in the private register, still manifest only to the small, intimate audience of her five husbands, the true Draupadī emerges, demanding revenge, blood, and a total reversal of fortunes.

Finally, let us look at an example from a very different work. The *Stutikusumāñjali* (*The Flower-Offerings of Praise*, hereafter the *SKA*) is a massive praise-poem to the god Śiva, composed by

[27] A similar point could be made about the Rāmāyaṇa's *Sundarakāṇḍa*, or *Beautiful Book*, from the parallel epic (Bronner 2010: 145–147, 246)

the fourteenth-century Kashmiri writer Jagaddhara Bhaṭṭa in high *kāvya* style.[28] Like a great many Sanskrit poems from its period, the *SKA* allots *śleṣa* a prominent place. Indeed, the poet bookends his gigantic work with *śleṣa* verses, uses this device frequently throughout his work, and dedicates "an emotionally climactic" chapter that is also "the longest individual section of the *SKA*" to a systematic exploration of its capacities in verse after verse.[29] To see one of the many possible effects the embrace of linguistic registers offers a devotee (*bhakta*) who sings God's praises, let us examine one rather simple stanza of the 143 ones in this chapter. This time, we can make do with a single English translation and some additional notes:

> *atyunnatān nijapadāc capalaś cyuto 'yaṃ bhūrīn bhramiṣyati jaḍaprakṛtiḥ*
> *kumārgān / matveti cet tyajasi mām ayam īdṛg eva gāṅgas tvayā kim iti*
> *mūrdhni dhṛtaḥ pravāhaḥ //* (*Stutikusumāñjaliḥ* 11.39)

> "This fickle fool lost his high ground,
> where he should have stayed,
> to recklessly stray
> in every bad way."
> Don't desert me thinking that!
> The Ganges water is no different,
> and you hold it on your head!

Almost through its third metrical quarter, the stanza reads like straightforward appeal to Śiva not to desert the speaker. The devotee/poet anticipates what God might be thinking of him and his faults. Śiva will correctly see in him a failure who "lost his high ground,/where he should have stayed" (*atyunnatān nijapadāc*), to "recklessly stray/ into every bad way" (*bhūrīn bhramiṣyati* […] *kumārgān*); all this makes him "fickle" (*capala*) and a "fool" (literally, one whose nature is stupid; *jaḍa-prakṛtiḥ*). But then we are surprised to hear that even this realization should not lead Śiva to leave him, because the behavior of

[28] For an excellent analysis of this work, see Stainton 2013: 232–359.
[29] Stainton 2013: 257.

the Ganges water, which Śiva holds on his head, "is no different" (*īdṛg eva*). This mention sends the unsuspecting reader—the more attuned reader surely saw this coming—to reread the opening line and look for ways in which it can also apply to the Ganges. Indeed, it turns out that this river, too, leaves its high place of origin, strays in a variety of bad or low places, and is fickle, or unstable and turbulent, the way flowing waters are. No resegmentation is necessary to make this meaning intelligible, nor does the poet resort to homonymy of the type we have seen earlier with the word *vijaya* (victory, a name for Arjuna). Rather, the embrace of meanings in this verse is mainly the result of a systematic exploitation of the spatial and moral connotations of the same words such as, "way," "high ground," and "straying." The only true homophone that requires a parallel or additional translation is *jaḍaprakṛtiḥ*, which signifies both an entity of foolish nature (for the devotee) and of liquid (*jala*) nature (for the river).

All this is rather simple and extremely common in such stanzas. But the technicalities of the *śleṣa* should not distract us from the special affective and aesthetic impact it fosters. The verse, after all, creates a cognitive dissonance: the reader has to reread (or constantly hold in mind) two distinct sets of meanings, one referring to the lowly human speaker and his impure deeds, and the other to the heavenly river of the gods and its purest water. This cognitive dissonance gives new urgency and power to the paradoxical ideal of bhakti that the poem conveys and the new hierarchy it heralds. The devotee's misdeeds are the basis of his appeal for Śiva's attention, affection, and, indeed, highest respect. After all, not only should this god not desert him, despite all his wrongdoing, but he should carry him high on his head, precisely because of his behavior, just as he does with the Ganges. This radical idea is by no means unique to Jagaddhara Bhaṭṭa, but we can see how *śleṣa*, with its typical cognitive dissonance, pushes it to the extreme.[30]

[30] For a discussion of similar notions in the praise poems of a roughly contemporaneous devotee from southern India, Vedānta Deśika, see Bronner and Shulman 2009: xl–xlvii.

Concluding Thoughts

All languages are prone to ambiguities, even if each in a different way, and poets in all literary cultures have always been fascinated by this phenomenon, perhaps because it "undermines the basis on which our assumptions about the communicative efficacy of language rest," namely, "the monosemous reality" according to which "the single, unambiguous meaning is … [the] 'kernel' … while ambiguity is … the husk."[31] But as I have been arguing here, the long-standing experiments of South Asian poets with *śleṣa*, in a variety of languages and media, are unique in human history. What we have here is a self-conscious movement that for a millennium and a half cultivated the seeming husk of ambiguity and turned it into their staple. Indeed, this movement developed a technology that powered literary trains that not only reached multiple destinations simultaneously but also took poetry further than it formerly had gone.

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[31] Attridge 1988: 140–141.

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