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Bombs and Shrapnel Drawing Verses
The Motif of Violence in Harshdev Madhav's Poetry*

ABSTRACT: The article introduces and analyses selected Sanskrit poems composed by Harshdev Madhav (b. 20.10.1954 in Vartej, Gujarat), a renowned Indian poet honoured in 2006 with the Sahitya Akademi Award for Sanskrit. The compositions in question reveal the directions in which modern Sanskrit poetry is hoping to proceed: break with literary norms established by the rhetoricians of classical literature; exploration of contemporary themes and motifs; and introduction of new literary forms in Sanskrit writings. Analysis of Madhav's free verses, haikus, typographic poems, and other compositions focused on the theme of violence shows how the language often considered 'dead' can become a medium for poetry—endowed with ingenuity and modernity—which tackles problems of interest to the contemporary readers.

KEYWORDS: Harshdev Madhav, modern Sanskrit, haiku, typographic poetry, violence

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Modern Sanskrit literature—An overview

Sanskrit is not a language commonly associated with modern or contemporary poetry. However, despite the largely prevalent opinion that it is dead, it continues to be a medium of poetic expression also today;[1] similarly, it is not tenable o consider Sanskrit poets and writers of the 20th and 21st centuries to be an unimportant minority. A close look at modern Sanskrit literature reveals a large number of highly variated works; yet, the writers who choose this old Indian language as their creative medium are often ignored and considered 'less contemporary' than the poets who use vernacular languages. Many people are not even aware of the revolution taking place in modern Sanskrit poetry. Today, Sanskrit is used not only to create metrical poems on classical themes, but also to tackle contemporary topics and issues in literary forms that break with the norms and regulations governing Sanskrit literature of the past.

In 1978, T. G. Mainkar made a tendentious remark, namely that "contemporary Sanskrit Literature is mostly traditional" (Mainkar 1978: 114). Discussing the themes and issues addressed by the 20th-century Sanskrit poets, he argued:

> (…) the problems which dominate and disturb the mind of writers in other languages, the sorrows and problems of the common man, the grim reality and also the misery of life, the problems that a sensitive mind is likely to raise about life not only in this country but in the world as a whole, seem to be far away from the minds of these writers. (Mainkar 1978: 114)

[1] The matter of Sanskrit being still alive (or not) came to the fore in the academic discourse at the beginning of the 21st century, when Sheldon Pollock published his article titled "The Death of Sanskrit" and argued that Sanskrit is a dead language that does not serve anymore as "the vehicle for living thought" (Pollock 2001: 414). However, as we shall see, modern Sanskrit literature and its authors seem to prove otherwise by using the language as a means to express what Pollock calls the 'living thought': they react to contemporary events, give voice to opinions, express subjective emotions, and use Sanskrit not as a medium for imitating and replicating classical literature, but creating something new, modern, and original.

Mainkar's claim appears exaggerated as by the time his remark was made, the post-independence Sanskrit authors had already begun addressing a plethora of contemporary historical events as well as personal concerns. During the 1950s and 1960s, for example, their works were deeply influenced by Gandhian ideals and the political climate of the newly independent India. Although these themes might not have immediately appeared to reflect what may be referred to as 'the sorrows and problems of the common man,' they were intrinsically tied to the socio-economic and emotional realities of the nation, thereby shaping the lives and writings of these authors. Indeed, political, social, and religious themes continue to dominate Sanskrit literature also today.

Nevertheless, Mainkar's observation was not entirely without merit. At the time of his article's publication, Sanskrit literature was predominantly traditional, characterized by metrical composition and standardized forms. Genres such as novel, auto/biography, short story, and travelogue were still novelties in Sanskrit writings and not yet fully explored.[2] The first-person narration was uncommon, the use of figures of speech adhered closely to classical norms, and the imagery often drew heavily on mythology and earlier literary traditions. However, the late 20th and the early 21st centuries saw a marked shift, with modernization in Sanskrit literature becoming more pronounced. While the

[2] Even though until the last decades of the 20th century the given genres were not yet common in Sanskrit literature, they were not unprecedented. Kshama Rao (1890–1953), for example, was the author of a biography of her father, Shankar Pandurang Pandit (*Śaṅkarajivanākhyāna,* published in 1939), short stories (e.g., the collections titled *Kathāmuktāvali*, published in 1915, and *Kathāpañcaka*, published in 1933), and a memoir/travelogue titled *Vicitraparişadyātrā* (published in 1938) describing her experiences at the Trivandrum session of the All-India Oriental Conference (for more on Kshama Rao, see Sudyka 2024). Among other Sanskrit authors of short stories, biographies or travelogues from before the end of the 19th century, one must mention such names as Samarapungava Dikshit, Satya Vrat Shastri, Madhav Srihari Aney, Padma Shastri, or V. Raghavan. As to Sanskrit novels, the first was published at the beginning of the 20th century, when, starting from 1901, the monthly magazine *Sankṛtacandrikā,* serialised the novel titled *Śivarājavijaya* by Pt. Ambika Datta Vyas (Tripathi 2016: 176). The other notable authors of Sanskrit novels are H. V. Nagaraj Rao, Radhavallabh Tripathi, Ramsumer Yadav, and Keshab Chandra Dash.

'traditional' path has not been abandoned—many contemporary Sanskrit writers continue to compose metrical poems on classical themes in established genres such as *mahākāvya, śataka,* and *dūtakāvya*—innovative approaches have gained traction. New forms of writing, contemporary subjects, and literary experimentation have come to the fore.

In this regard, it is worth noting that the notion of modernity in Sanskrit literature may be understood in two different ways: temporally and thematically. Advocates of the temporal perspective classify all Sanskrit works created after the mid-19th century as modern.[3] By contrast, proponents of the thematic approach argue that only works addressing non-traditional subjects or employing new genres qualify as modern. A survey of contemporary Sanskrit literature reveals a blend of these two trends, encompassing works that emulate classical style and form, as well as those that challenge established norms, explore modern themes, and introduce new literary forms. Notably, many writers do not confine themselves to a single course of action but experiment with a variety of approaches. This diversity is particularly evident in poetry, a form deeply rooted in Sanskrit's literary past. Numerous poets, including Radhavallabh Tripathi, Satya Vrat Shastri, Vagish Shastri, G. B. Palsule, Ogeti Parikshit Sarma, R. Ganesh, Shankardev Avatare, Keshab Chandra Dash, Om Prakash Pande, and others, have contributed to the modernization of Sanskrit poetry. While a detailed analysis of their works lies beyond the scope of this article, a few notable trends in modern Sanskrit poetry warrant attention.

Poets such as Abhiraja Rajendra Mishra, Shrinivasa Rath, and Pushpa Dikshita are often regarded as pioneers of modern Sanskrit lyrical poetry. Others, including Keshab Chandra Dash, Rabindra Kumar Panda, Praveen Pandya, and Rushiraj Jani, have composed non-metrical poems more aligned with contemporary poetic sensibilities than the rigid prosodic structures of traditional Sanskrit verse.

[3] As noted by Radhavallabh Tripathi (2016: 168), "various periods of the history of Modern Sanskrit literature have been suggested by scholars and researchers": some of them, like Rajendra Mishra, do not give specific dates, the others include in it also the early 19th-century literary production, while some, like Kalanath Shastri, place the beginnings of modern Sanskrit literature around 1890.

Innovative poetic genres, such as ghazals and sonnets, have also found a place in modern Sanskrit literature. The ghazal (Arabic *ġazal*), an Arabic poetic form consisting of rhyming couplets on themes of romantic or spiritual love, has been adopted by Sanskrit poets like Bhiraj Rajendra Mishra and Bhatta Mathuranatha Shastri. Similarly, the sonnet (Italian *sonetto*), a 14-line poetic form originating in Italy and quickly popularised in European literature, was explored by Birendra Kumar Bhattacharya. Modern Sanskrit poetry has also been enriched by indigenous influences. For instance, Bhatta Mathuranatha Shastri composed Sanskrit lyrics for *thumri* songs (Hindi *ṭhumrī*), a vocal genre of Indian music often characterized by themes of love, separation, and devotion, frequently tinged with gentle eroticism.

As this overview illustrates, many contemporary Sanskrit poets experiment with form and content, exploring themes and styles unfamiliar to classical Sanskrit literature. Among these modern innovators, Harshdev Madhav stands out as a particularly prominent figure. His contributions to the evolution of Sanskrit poetry, including his exploration of new genres, non-metrical free verse, and even typographical poetry—relatively novel forms not only in Sanskrit but in other languages as well—make him a central subject of this article.

Harshdev Madhav and the motif of violence in his poetry

Harshdev Madhav (Harshavadan Mansukhlal Jani, born October 20, 1954 in Vartej, Gujarat), called by Samir Kumar Datta (2012: 85) "a modern poet in true sense of the term", embodies changes that have taken place in Sanskrit poetry in the last decades. Madhav began writing in 1970, although his first work was published in 1985.[4] He was

[4] The first published book by Madhav was *Rathyāsu Jambuvarṇāṇām Śirāṇām* (1985), a collection of Sanskrit poems, followed by *Hāth Phamphose Āndhala Sugandhane*, a Gujarati poetry collection that was released the same year. The information comes from the interview with Harshdev Madhav conducted on October 8, 2009, under the program "Meet the Author", periodically arranged by the Sahitya Akademi since 1987. The interview with Madhav was conducted in Hindi.

quickly noticed on the Indian literary scene; in 1979 he received the Kavilok Śiśukāvya Prize. In the 1990s, his career blossomed and he received numerous awards, including the Gujarat Sanskrit Academy Award (1994), the Kalpavalli Award by Bharatiya Bhasha Parishad (1997), and the All-India Kalidas Award for 1997–1998, to mention only a few. In 2006, already an established poet with a recognised reputation, he was presented with the Sahitya Akademi Award for *Tava sparśe sparśe*, his Sanskrit poetry collection.

Harshdev Madhav is a prolific writer, composing not only in Sanskrit but also in Gujarati and Hindi. Apart from poetry, he writes dramas, short stories, novels, essays and articles on literary criticism; prepares dictionaries, books on grammar, and materials for teaching and learning conversational Sanskrit. He is also deeply committed to the idea of popularising Sanskrit among children and recently, in 2024, his collection of short stories, titled *Bubhukṣitaḥ kākaḥ*, has been selected for the Sahitya Akademi Bal Sahitya Puraskar in the category of Sanskrit literature.[5] Madhav refuses to perceive Sanskrit as a dead language; he says:

> I am not writing poems to show my ego, fame or to attract others. I write because poetry is my prayer. It is prayer for Sanskrit. With my life it is the evidence of liveliness of my language which I breathe (…) A soldier protects his motherland till last breath. (Madhav 2021)

The thematic scope of Madhav's Sanskrit poetry is vast. He does not shy away from contemporary issues but poetically reacts to them. Therefore, apart from the common poetical themes, such as love, politics, or social problems, his numerous poems refer to wars, acts of terrorism, or other violent events. The majority of Madhav's compositions is non-metrical, although the classical stanzas with motifs well-known from *kāvya* literature are not alien to him either. The poems analysed

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The nearly one-hour-long recording is available online (see Sahitya Akademi 2009). Its abridged version in English was released by the Sahitya Akademi in the form of a brochure (see *s.a.* 2009).

[5] See Sahitya Akademi 2024 for the list of the Award winners.

in this article were chosen for two main reasons: all of them focus on violence in its many forms and aspects and they represent various genres in lyrical poetry, many of which were introduced in Sanskrit for the first time by Madhav.

The first poem to be discussed, *Ātaṅkavādaḥ*, "Terrorism", published in 1990 in a collection titled *Alakanandā*,[6] is an example of a free verse. Open forms of poetry, devoid of regular meter or rhymes, emerged in world literature relatively early. In Polish poetry, for instance, the first non-metrical poems were composed already in the 17th century. The form became widespread especially in the 19th century in France (so-called *vers libre*). At the same time, Walt Whitman popularized it in America, paving a road for the early 20th-century poets around the world who eventually made it the dominating form of poetic expression. In Sanskrit, as already mentioned, free verses started to surface only in the late 20th century and at the beginning of the current millennium. Madhav's *Ātaṅkavādaḥ* does contain several rhymes but the pattern is not regular and the poem does not follow any particular metrical regulations:

ātaṅkavādaḥ	Terrorism
dāso'sti krodhasya,	Is a servant of anger,
bandījano'sti krauryasya,	It is a prisoner of cruelty,
paratantro'sti amānuṣatve,	It is a dependent of inhumanity,
vyādhigrasto'sti hiṃsratāyāḥ,	It is afflicted by the disease of enjoying violence,
khañjo'sti matsareṇa,	It is limping with hostility,
mṛto'sti pūrvagraheṇa ||	It is death-like with prejudice.
*	*
napuṇsaka ātaṅkavādaḥ	Impotent terrorism
kathaṃ sṛjet krāntim?	How could it spin a movement?
hīnatāyāḥ śakṛto jāyante	From the excrements left behind are born
kīṭāḥ, na mahāmānavāḥ ||	Worms, not great men.

[6] The poem was reprinted later, alongside its Hindi translation by P. Pandya, in *Smṛtiyoṃ kī jīrṇ śrāvastī nagarī mẽ* ["In the Old Shravasti City of Memories"], published in Jaipur by Rachna Prakashan (Mādhav 2008: 58). All translations in the present article are mine, unless stated otherwise.

*	*
ātaṅkavādas tṛṣarto'sti,	Terrorism is thirsty,
ataḥ mānavaraktaṃ pibati |	So it drinks human blood.
ātaṅkavādo bubhukṣito'sti,	Terrorism is hungry,
ato māṃsakhaṇḍāni carvati |	So it chews chunks of flesh.
*	*
ātaṅkavādaḥ svacchāyā yadi darpaṇe paśyet	If terrorism were to see its own reflection in the mirror
tarhi jānīyāt sva-rākṣasatvam ||	It would recognise its own malevolence.
*	*
śraddhāyā dīpakaṃ śāmayituṃ	The destructive hurricane of terrorism tries To extinguish
ātaṅkavādasya vātyāsāraḥ prayatate |	The lamp of faith
apyasti tava samīpe	Do you have
taṃ niroddhuṃ hastaḥ? ||	A hand to stop it?

The poem is written in a simple language, without complicated compounds or rarely used words and mimics the rhythm of natural speech. However, the structural simplicity of the poem does not hamper its poetic flow. The author does not use any particular metre but takes advantage of other techniques that help to create a structure; for example, in the first strophe, where the construction of the line with a central *asti*, "is", is repeated several times, or in the third strophe, where the structure of the first two lines is mirrored in the next two.

The poem focuses on the nature of terrorism, a theme explored by several other modern Sanskrit poets. In 1988, Vagish Shastri addressed Sikh ethno-nationalist terrorism in his metrical composition *Ātaṅkavādaśataka*. Noteworthy poems on the same subject from the 21st century include Rama Kant Shukla's *Ātaṅkavādasya Ghoratāṇḍavam*, which reflects on the al-Qaeda attack on the World Trade Center in New York on September 11, 2001, and several works by Prafulla Kumar Mishra, published in the 2011 collection, *Tathāpi Satyasya Mukham*.[7]

[7] There are a few poems on terrorism in Mishra's collection: *Svāgataṃ te megha*, *Madhukīṃ pītvā*, *Kutra ārambhaḥ*, and *Pratīkṣā*.

In Harshdev Madhav's poem, one of the earliest Sanskrit lyrics on this topic, terrorism is portrayed almost as a living entity with a distinct appearance and physiological needs. The poem emphasizes the feeding imagery, and the repeated syntactical structures tangibly shape the corporeality of the abstract concept of the all-consuming terrorism. Madhav concludes *Ātaṅkavādaḥ* with a thought-provoking question directed at the audience, and intended to inspire reflection and underscore the urgency of taking an action.

The employment of rhetorical questions, usually in the concluding parts of the poem, is another signature technique used by Madhav:[8] among his works, one can even find short forms consisting only of a series of questions. A fine example of this is an untitled poem that juxtaposes the beauty and delicacy of nature with the vision of an attacked city in a genre completely innovative for Sanskrit poetry:

***
santraste pure
śalabhaḥ kaṃ nu pṛcchet
puṣpasaṅketam?[9]

***
In the city trembling in terror
Whom could a butterfly ask
What is the address of the flower?

The short untitled poem quoted above, so different from *Ātaṅkavādaḥ,* takes advantage of a Japanese genre called haiku ('playful

[8] Concerning the Gujarati background of the poet, it is possible that (consciously or not) he assimilated the compositional trends characteristic of the Jain poetry, including the idea of finishing the verse with an enquiry or using the dialogues endowed with questions and answers—sometimes constituting the entire work—to provide teaching aimed at propagation of religion and moral values, as well as pursuit of knowledge.

[9] Sanskrit texts of this and the following poem (*marmadārakaḥ*…) were obtained through the personal communication with Harshdev Madhav.

phrase', sometimes referred to as *hokku*), introduced in Sanskrit poetry by Madhav.[10] Classical Japanese haikus are governed by a set of rules that concern both their structure and content. They are supposed to consist of 17 *on* ('sounds'), units of duration or *morae*. Originally, haiku was written in one line vertically, despite the division into five, seven, and five *on*. In transliteration, due to pattern 5–7–5, it is usually written in three verses.[11] Traditionally, haiku should contain a *kigo*, 'season word', a word or phrase associated with a particular season, and *kireji*, 'cutting word', which plays a similar role as a *caesura* in western poetry. *Kireji* helps mark rhythmic divisions, cut the stream of thought, or emphasise the final sense of the poem.

Haikus embody human communication with nature; they are designed to suppress impressions, elicit an emotional response by capturing a moment, and convey the emotion of that particular moment in the body of poetry. Very often, they suggest more than they describe explicitly.[12] Makoto Ueda (1963: 423) notes that "(…) the haiku has its own poetics difficult to imitate for a foreign poet with a different language, culture, and pattern of thinking". However, the genre became very popular outside of Japan, and poets around the world try to adapt it within the framework of the languages they use. In his haikus, Harshdev Madhav does not follow the traditional *morae* count, although it could be used in Sanskrit since the syllables can be divided into *monomorae* and *bimorae* and the moraic weight is the basis for distinguishing the so-called *mātrāvṛtta*, '*morae*-based meters'. Instead, Madhav exploits the same system that is frequently used by poets who compose haikus in other languages, like English or French, where the count of *on* has been substituted with the count of syllables.

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[10] Since Harshdev Madhav published the first Sanskrit haiku poems, other authors followed his steps, for example, Ranjana Rashmi, Ranjan Joshi, and Harekrishna Meher. The later, like Harshdev Madhav, also composes Sanskrit poems in the style of *sijo*, a genre in Korean poetry written in three lines, and *tanka*, a genre of classical Japanese poetry traditionally written in five lines.

[11] The pattern of syllable count is not replicated in the proposed translations of Madhav's haikus.

[12] For more about the structure and character of haikus, see Harr 1975.

Although the poem quoted above does not contain *kigo* or *kireji*,[13] it successfully grasps the concept of haiku. Madhav manages to incorporate the tension and contrast between the images of an attacked, terrorised city and the delicate nature of a butterfly, a common symbol of joy, freedom, and transformation. The poem evokes emotions related to the concept of universal loneliness, which brings to mind the Japanese idea of *sabi* characteristic of haiku poetry. *Sabi*, as Makoto Ueda notes, is "closely related to the 'poetic spirit'." The term stems from an adjective, *sabishi*, which means 'lonely' or 'desolate' (Ueda 1963: 425). In Madhav's poem, the butterfly symbol, the idea of a frail and vulnerable representation of liberation, rebirth, and the soul of a person, in contrast to the picture of a terrorised city, is an expression of freedom tinted with sadness and loneliness.

Madhav juxtaposes the delicate elements of nature with the subtly suggested violent images also in his other haikus, like in the following poem, which plays on the contrast between the frantic *tāṇḍava* dance and the soothing vision of the moonrise:

***
marmadārakaḥ
trāsavādatāṇḍave
candrodayo'pi

***
During the frantic *tāṇḍava* dance causing terror
Even the Moonrise
Is striking the vitals

In this poem, Madhav refers to an image well known from the Hindu mythology. At the end of each cycle of creation, preservation,

[13] Although a butterfly could be perceived as a *kigo*, it is not a universal symbol directly associated with a specific season; in India, butterflies are not most active in any particular months, as their appearance depends on the region. In Delhi, for example, butterflies usually breed around April–May, while in south India their migration starts in October–November.

and dissolution, god Śiva destroys the universe through a vigorous and violent *tāṇḍava* dance. The terrifying vision, the poetic scene of terror, which according to the Hindu imagery is an integral element of the transpersonal, universal human experience, is emphasised as influencing even the usually gentle and soothing image of the moonrise, which brings to mind the autumn season when, according to classical Sanskrit poetry, the moon is the brightest. In this poem, Madhav seems to follow the advice of Lorraine Ellis Harr, who notes:

> Each poem, each haiku, is an aesthetic and intuitive expression of phenomena evolving both in nature and in human society, but writing about humans, write about the "nature of things" as they relate to human life. (Harr 1975: 118)

The character of haikus requires a certain tenderness; to a large extent, they exploit suggestions and offer impressions rather than conclusions. Madhav is not a stranger to this kind of expression and uses it also in non-haiku poems. The poet is famous for so-called mono--image poems, short compositions that focus on particular objects, emotions, and phenomena perceived from many angles and described in various contexts. They are usually presented in a group bound by the dominating theme, but each of them constitutes a complete image that can exist individually.[14] The idea of mono-image poems comes directly from Imagism, an early-20th-century movement in English poetry inspired by Japanese *tanka*s and haikus. The imagists, like Ezra Pound, Hilda Doolittle, and Amy Lowell, postulated economy of language, focusing on a single image and revealing its essence in a simple and straightforward free verse.

In a short series of mono-image poems on god, Madhav included a suggestive composition that reflects on the threat from nuclear weapons:

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[14] The mono-image poems gained popularity in Indian vernacular poetry especially in the second half of the 20th century. Madhu Kothari, for example, composed many such poems in Gujarati.

Say to God sleeping in the womb of an atom-bomb
that in my house
one sparrow is making nest.
What is its future? (…)[15]

In many ways, the composition resembles the spirit of haikus: juxtaposing a delicate image of nature embodied in a sparrow with a violent act of atomic bombing, it elicits an emotional response, inducing a feeling of helplessness. The feeling is magnified by the contrast between the great, unpredictable, possibly threatening, and impossible-to-influence divine power and the small bird, which symbolises love, devotion, hope, and resilience.

The motif of nuclear weapon and bombing occurs frequently in Madhav's poetry. In one of his most famous short poems, the author reflects on the nuclear attack on Japan during the Second World War:

buddhasya bhikṣāpātre
nimajjitam asti
aṇubombadagdhaṃ nagaram || (Mādhav 2008: 54)

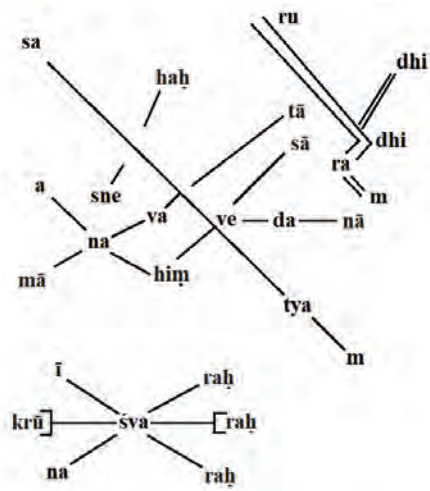
In the begging bowl of Buddha
The city consumed by the atomic bomb
Has drowned

Once again, the poem speaks of the violent act of nuclear bombing in a religious context. Usually, Madhav uses words that do not allude to any particular religion but to universal concepts, such as *īśvara* for an

[15] Madhav 1999: 30, modified. The mono-image poem quoted above is a part of a larger group of short compositions collectively titled "God". The quoted translation from Sanskrit was made by the poet. First published in the Triveni journal (see Madhav 1987–1988), the translated poem appeared also in a slightly modified version in the anthology titled "Head Lines Again" (Madhav 1999: 30). The Sanskrit original of the composition was included in *Alakanandā* (Mādhav 1990: 82). Unfortunately, at the moment, the Sanskrit text of the poem is unavailable to the author of the present article.

unspecified divine figure. However, here he explicitly refers to Buddhism, one of the two dominant religious systems in Japan:[16] the alms bowl, used to receive offerings, emphasises the peaceful nature of Buddhism, contrasted with a brutal and destructive historical event.

As already noted, in his poetry, Madhav often refers to historical, contemporary events. In the composition titled *Bāmbavisphoṭaḥ*, "The Bomb Blast," inspired by the bomb explosion that took place in Bombay (now Mumbai) on March 12, 1993, the poet exploited an unusual form:[17]



mānavasya mā x na x ve x vi x śvā x saḥ
mandireṣu rākṣasānāṃ pratiṣṭheyam, bata!

[16] The second one is Shintō.

[17] *Bāmbavisphoṭaḥ* was published in the collection (*Niṣkrāntāḥ sarve*), ["(Everyone has left)"] from 1997 (see Mādhavaḥ 1997: 32), but the composition is marked by the author with the date 8 September, 1994. The following scheme of the poem follows the typographic layout employed by Madhav, but the original *devanāgarī* script has been substituted by the International Alphabet of Sanskrit Transliteration (IAST), as in the other examples of the quoted compositions.

The poem exemplifies typographic poetry, which leverages the meaning of words, the layout of letters, words, and phrases, as well as blank spaces, lines, and shapes to convey its message. Madhav classifies this and similarly structured poems as 'typographic', though they could also be considered to be examples of concrete or visual poetry.

In the early 20th century, works utilizing images or typographic arrangements to enhance or complement the semantic layer of the text were not novel in world literature. In European antiquity, graphic arrangements of text appeared in forms such as Hellenistic *technopaegnia*, labyrinth poems, and grid poems (*carmina cancellata* in Latin). Non-European traditions also contributed to the development of visual poetry. For instance, Chinese pictorial poetry, with examples dating back to the 4th century CE, and specific forms of visual Sanskrit poetry, which had likely gained prominence in Indian literature by the 6th century CE, highlight the global reach and enduring appeal of this artistic form.[18] The emergence of similar poetic phenomena across centuries, cultures, and diverse linguistic and geographical contexts has resulted in terminological ambiguity in classifying and describing works that combine traditional poetry with visual components. The terms most commonly used in this context are concrete poetry and visual poetry. Concrete poetry refers to works that integrate elements of deconstructed traditional poetry with visual art, emphasizing the structure of language and the role of typographic arrangement in exploring the relationship between the material and conceptual aspects of the text. Despite its specific focus, concrete poetry often overlaps with visual poetry, which can be broadly defined thus:

> (…) a lyrical text (up to modern times generally also a versified text) constructed in such a way that the words—sometimes with the help of purely pictorial means—form a graphic figure which in relation to the verbal utterance has both mimetic and symbolic function. (Ernst 1986: 9)

[18] Sanskrit visual poetry will be presented in more detail later in this article. The aforementioned dating of its oldest examples stems from the fact that as early as the 6th century CE, in Bhāravi's work titled *Kirātārjunīya,* the author used elements of visual poetry.

The 20th century was particularly rich in literary experimentation, leading to the emergence of new poetic forms and trends such as concrete poetry, lettrism, zaum, and digital poetry, to name just a few. However, prior to Harshdev Madhav, the only Sanskrit poetic tradition employing visual components in literary composition was *citrakāvya*. This broad term encompasses a variety of phenomena, figures, and literary texts that were previously categorized under other names. Its prevalence is likely tied to its inherent ambiguity. *Citrakāvya* refers to poetic works (*kāvya*) characterized by *citra*—a term whose indeterminacy allows for the inclusion of diverse and seemingly unrelated poetic forms. The word *citra* functions as both an adjective ('vivid', 'varied', 'astonishing', 'striking') and a noun ('adornment', 'wonder', 'outline', 'image', or 'puzzle'). As such, *citrakāvya* encompasses poetry that is astonishing, visual, or puzzling, without prioritizing any single meaning, although each of the meanings denoted by the word *citra* may refer to a seemingly distinct type of poetic work. This ambiguity allows for the accommodation of various forms, including literary puzzles and wordplay that may not necessarily incorporate visual elements, unlike visual poetry, where the visual aspect is central. Sanskrit literary theorists' discussions of *citrakāvya* do little to clarify its boundaries. Some treat it as a stylistic figure with numerous categories, while others regard it as a literary genre or a type of poetry. The term applies to individual stanzas, groups of stanzas within longer works, or entire compositions. *Citrakāvya* includes a wide array of forms, such as literary puzzles, palindromes, verses in which all phonemes share the same place of articulation, *ekākṣara*s (verses featuring a single consonant combined with different vowels), paronomasias, and poems or sections of poems that, though indistinguishable from classical verse in linear arrangement, may be rewritten in visual forms like geometric shapes or the outlines of objects (e.g., a drum, sword, or lotus flower). These works were directed at erudite audiences capable of appreciating and decoding both the semantic meaning conveyed by the text and the additional layers suggested by its sound structure or hidden visual design. Despite the generally negative views of rhetoricians, *citrakāvya*s hold a significant position in Sanskrit literature and

were composed by notable poets such as already mentioned Bhāravi (15th canto of *Kirātārjunīya*), Māgha (7th century, 19th canto of *Śiśupālavadha*), Ānandavardhana (9th century, *Devīśataka*), and A. R. Rajaraja Varma (1863–1918, *Citranakṣatramālā*), among others. Similar compositions continued into the 20th century. For instance, Ramroop Pathak received the Sahitya Akademi Award in 1967 for his *citrakāvya* titled *Citrakāvyakautukam*. In contemporary times, poets such as R. Ganesh and Shankar Rajaraman continue to compose modern *citrakāvya*s, often adhering to classical visual patterns described by Sanskrit rhetoricians while occasionally diverging from traditional themes to incorporate more contemporary motifs and subjects.[19] Harshdev Madhav does not compose *citrakāvya*s. His visual poems, including the already quoted *Bāmbavisphoṭaḥ*, explore new paths in Sanskrit poetry.[20] The visual effect and the layout of the text are not hidden, but they are the first to be noticed, even before the meaning of the words. In this sense, Madhav's typographic poetry is closer to the western concrete poetry than to *citrakāvya*.

Bāmbavisphoṭaḥ consists of four parts; three of them are groups of words separated into syllables and letters connected by lines, and the fourth is a meaningful sentence partially broken down by a series of *x* signs. The central part of the poem is composed around the line that designates the word *satyam*, 'truth', or 'veracity'. The line breaks the following words: *snehaḥ*, 'love', 'affection', 'friendship'; *mānavatā*, 'humanity; and *anahiṃsā*, 'non-nonviolence', 'brutality' or 'savagery'. The word *vedanā*, 'pain', 'torture', or 'agony', is placed on the side, almost like a cruel bridge that leads to the group of syllables and letters scattered above. These letters, connected with double lines, create the word *rudhiram*, 'blood'. They form a stream with the repeated syllable *dhi*, which brings to mind a spatter of blood. Below these two groups of letters, the words *īśvaraḥ*, 'lord' or 'god', and *naśvaraḥ*, 'transitory', 'perishable', 'frail' or 'mischievous' intertwine with each

[19] For more on *citrakāvya* see, for example, Jha 1975, Lienhard 1996; 2007, and Cielas 2013; 2016.

[20] To the best of my knowledge, no other contemporary Sanskrit poet composes similar works.

other through the middle syllable *śva*. The composition is broken in half with the adjective *krūraḥ*, 'cruel'. The poem ends with the following segment:

mānavasya mā x na x ve x vi x śvā x saḥ
mandireṣu rākṣasānāṃ pratiṣṭheyam, bata!

A human's trust x in x hu x man x i x ty[21]
This is, alas, the consecration of demons in the temples!

The words *mānave viśvāsaḥ*, '[a] trust in humanity', are shattered and clearly visualise how the explosion breaks not only human bodies but also interhuman relationships and mutual trust. The last line of the poem warns against the idolatry of evil that takes birth in 'the temples': the actual places of worship (possible sites for spreading religious fundamentalism), the human hearts (as potentially nurturing hatred), and the motherlands (due to extreme nationalism and xenophobia).[22]

Bāmbavisphoṭaḥ is a dynamic poem that evokes the sense of chaos and destruction viewed as an integral part of the described event. The typography of the poem mirrors the act of bombing and its result: havoc and devastation. The ideas expressed through words are shattered; humanity, truth, and love are broken into pieces mixed with violence, agony, and traces of blood. Even the concept of god is 'destroyed' and is set side by side with frailty and cruelty.

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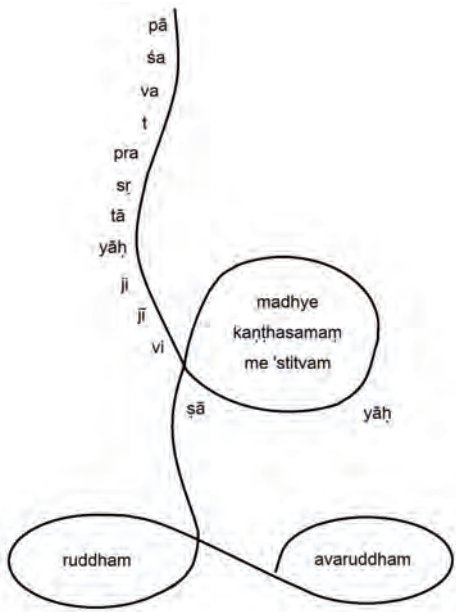
[21] In the Sanskrit text, *x* that symbolises bomb explosion and devastation occurs in this line five times, between the syllables of *mānave viśvāsaḥ*. This layout is replicated in the translation; however, the proposed solution is not ideal. In the original, *mānavasya* and *mānave* are two grammatical forms of the same noun, whereas in the translation they are rendered as "a human's" and "in humanity," respectively. An alternative translation of the line could be "man's faith in man." However, this creates a significant difference in syllable count: *mānave viśvāsaḥ* has six syllables, while "faith in man" has only three.

[22] The understanding of word *mandira*, 'temple', is an interpretation proposed by Harshdev Madhav and expressed in a private communication with the author of this article.

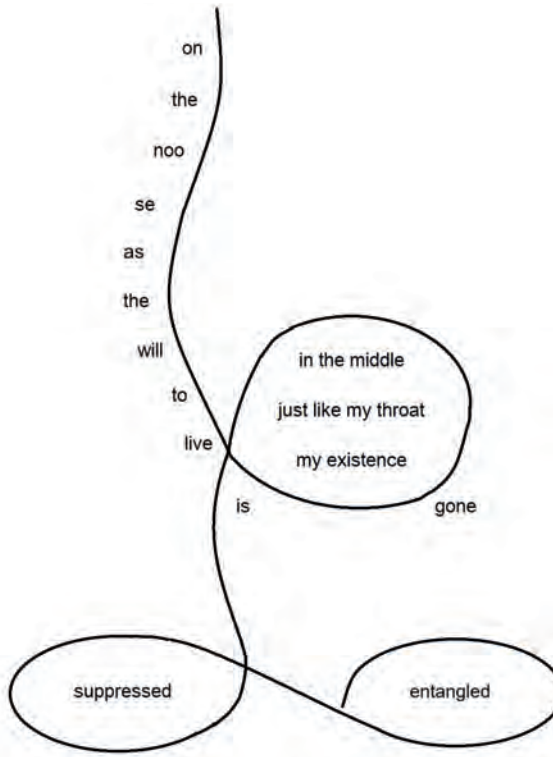
The final poem to be discussed exploits a different kind of violence, namely the suicide: the ultimate act of self-violence. The composition titled *Mumūrṣā*, "A Desire for Death", dated October 23, 1994, was published six years later, in a book of poetry named *Bhāvasthirāṇi jananāntarasauhṛdāni*, "The Emotions of Former Lifetimes Rooted in the Heart",[23] and suggestively arranged typographically in the form of a noose:



Unlike in the case of *Bāmbavisphoṭaḥ*, the arrangement of the text does not rely heavily on the count of syllables. Part of the poem is divided into syllables written along the upper part of the visually

[23] The title comes from the second stanza of the fifth act of Kālidāsa's play, *Abhijñānaśākuntala*, "The Recognition of Śakuntalā" (Kale 1969: 160). M. R. Kale translates the phrase as "(…) the associations (*lit*. friendships) of past lives remaining permanently impressed (on the mind)" (Kale 1969: 161). The text of *Mumūrṣā* is quoted after Mādhavaḥ 2000: 10.

represented rope that forms the noose,[24] but they are written one under another and do not intertwine with the syllables of other words. Because the rest of the composition is not broken into syllables and/or letters, it is easier to propose a translation of the poem:



[24] There is one exception to this rule: according to the rules of *sandhi*, the text written along the 'rope' should be *pāśavatprasṛtāyā jijīviṣāyāḥ*. Because the word *pāśavat* ends with a stop letter after a vowel (*at*), the syllable ends with that consonant (*t*). Therefore, the final *t* of the word *pāśavat* should be a part of the syllable *vat*, since a single consonant devoid of a vowel cannot constitute a syllable. The author did not implement the rules of *sandhi* in the given fragment; this is visible also from the fact that the *visarga* from *āḥ* did not disappear after meeting the initial *j* of *jijīviṣāyāḥ*. The most probably, the poet aimed at simplifying the language

In the above translation, the number of syllables 'falling' along the graphically represented noose differs from the original Sanskrit, but the change does not interfere with the overall understanding of the poem. The structure of *Mumūrṣā* emphasises the mood and atmosphere of the composition, gives an impression of being trapped, accentuated additionally by the words 'suppressed' and 'entangled' in the lower part of the poem, which describe the existence of the lyrical subject. The essence of *Mumūrṣā* is the fragment placed in its central part, in the main loop of the rope. The viewer of the work naturally concentrates first on these three lines and then proceeds to the adjectives that define the 'existence'. The syllables falling in a cascade along the graphic representation of a rope are read at the end. The phrase "in the middle/just like my throat/my existence", sets the mood of the poem and the words read subsequently provide an explanation for the titular desire for death: the feeling of oppressive misery and imprisonment that leads to the loss of the will to live. *Mumūrṣā* is definitely one of the most morose, joyless, and melancholic compositions of Harshdev Madhav.

Conclusion

The creation of poems on violence inspired by contemporary events,[25] such as in the case of *Bāmbavisphoṭaḥ*, or by the emotions and traumas of individual people, such as exemplified by *Mumūrṣā*, is another evidence

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and keeping the text more legible, unobscured by the changes stemming from the application of *sandhi*. Interestingly, the *sandhi* rules are implemented in another part of the composition, in the phrase *me'stitvam* (*me astitvam*). Not following the rules governing the sound changes that occur at word boundaries or applying them selectively is one of the characteristics of modern Sanskrit literature, even though not all of the contemporary poets follow it.

[25] The motif of violence recurs frequently in Madhav's poetry, also in the context of global events. Within the poet's rich repertoire, one finds, for example, compositions on the Gulf War (see the English translation in Madhav 2000: 196) and the fall of the Berlin Wall (see the poem "To the Hands Destroying the Wall of the City of Berlin", first published in 1994 in the collection *Mṛgayā*, and later reprinted in

of modernity in Madhav's poetry, attesting to the variety of inspirations, also of non-Indian origin, that influence his creative production. The poet himself speaks about being inspired by Western poetry:

> I am a fan of not only Kalidasa, or Bhavbhooti, but also a fan of world poets. Charles Baudelaire is one of them. He taught me to see ugly things, evils of the world. So my poetry world is very different from others. I see all ugliness as I see beauty. Perhaps at the age of 28, I read his collection 'The Flowers of Evil'. (Madhav 2020)

In an essay published in 2000 in *Indian Literature*, Harshdev Madhav listed the achievements of the 20th-century Sanskrit writers and indicated several trends that they should eschew. He noted that Sanskrit writing "has succeeded in giving utterance to the struggle, agony and feelings of the common man" and warned against "the vanity to reserve Sanskrit only for Pandits" (Madhav 2000: 194–195). According to Madhav, Sanskrit should become "the language of the common people" (Madhav 2000: 195), free of complicated grammatical structures and artificiality, easy to follow and imbued with a "power of expression". This fact attests to the ongoing evolution of the language. Modern Sanskrit poetry tries to break the chains of prosody and complex grammatical systems to be closer to common people. However, it does not eschew the entirety of classical Sanskrit literary theory. Madhav and other contemporary Sanskrit poets draw from the rich repository of figures of speech, qualities of the text, and

Vraṇo Rūḍhagranthiḥ in 2010; English translation in Madhav 1999: 7). It is worth noting, however, that other modern Sanskrit poets also address similar themes. In addition to the aforementioned poems on terrorism, several other works stand out. B. N. Kalla's *Kaśmiraśatakam* (1992) is a metrical composition reflecting on the bloodshed in the Kashmir Valley. Rabindra Kumar Panda's *Kargilam*, a metrical poem on the 1999 Kargil War, was published in the collection *Kāvyakairavam* in 2007. Rushiraj Jani's free verse poetry, such as the works in his 2014 collection *Samudre Buddhasya Netre*, also explores themes of violence: notable examples include *Ta eva janāḥ*, which examines terrorism in a religious context; *Dalitasya Saṃvedanam*, addressing cruelty against Dalits; and *Mahiṣamardinyāścaitanyam*, which reflects on violence against women.

concepts theorised by the classical Indian rhetoricians but modify them to match with the spirit of modernity. One of the essential elements of composing poems that appeal to the modern mind is also the incorporation of contemporary themes, including wars, conflicts, and acts of violence. Harshdev Madhav does not step away from the problematic and difficult topics but embraces them in forms innovative for Sanskrit writing.

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