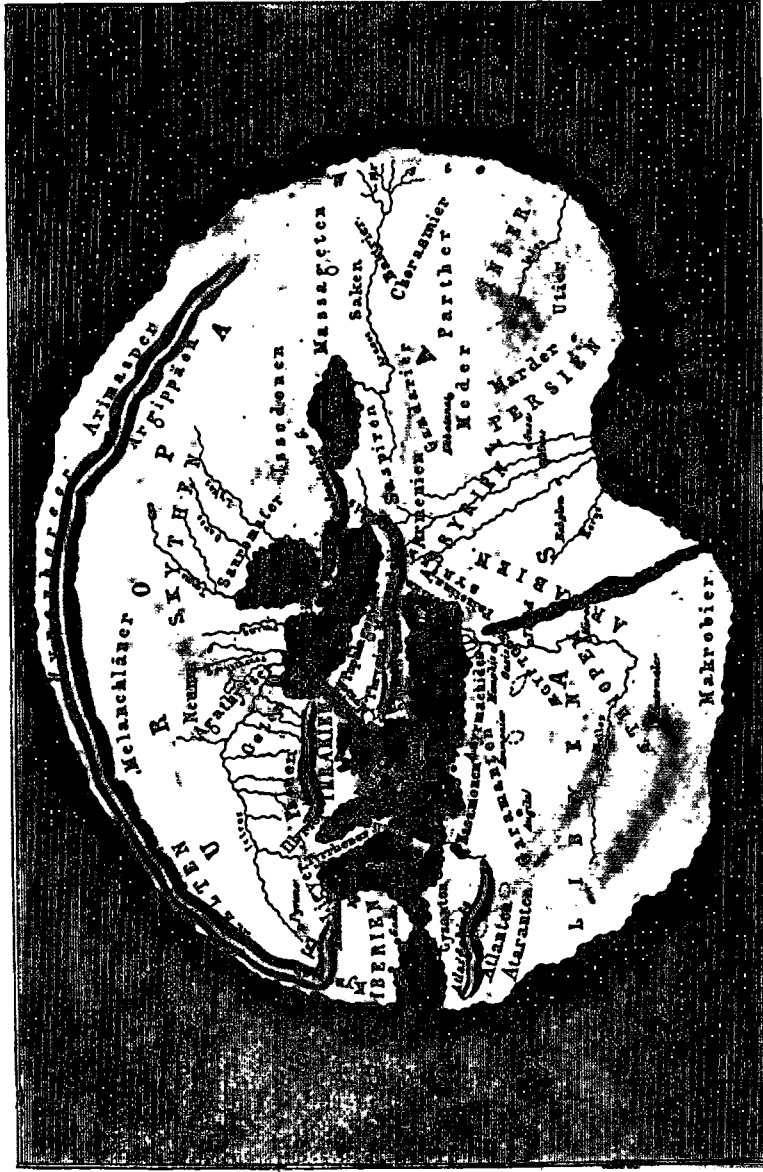


The World According to Herodotus. c. 450 B.C.E. A modern reconstruction of early maps based on Herodotus's descriptions in his *Histories* (see page 694). In order to pursue his historical research into the conflict between the Greeks and the Persians, Herodotus traveled extensively through the eastern Mediterranean world. He was so fascinated with the regions he saw and the customs practiced there that his *Histories* became a geographical and cultural study as well as a work of history. His world takes the form of a circular landmass centered on Asia Minor, a crucial meeting-point of cultures and his own birthplace. The world is surrounded by water, with southern Europe looming large but northern Europe almost unknown, and ample space is given to North Africa but almost none for sub-Saharan Africa. Herodotus had a good sense of Mesopotamia and Persia but little knowledge of regions east of Persian influence: Persian-controlled northern India appears, but not China. In all regions, the prominence given to rivers reflects their importance for overland travel and economic life in antiquity. (AKG, London.)



The Longman Anthology of World Literature



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THE ANCIENT WORLD

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Photo Research: *Photosearch, Inc.*

Manufacturing Buyer: *Lucy Hebard*

Printer and Binder: *Quebecor-World/Taunton*

Cover Printer: *The Lehigh Press, Inc.*

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

The Longman anthology of world literature / David Damrosch, general editor.—1st ed.
 v. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.
 Contents: v. A. The ancient world—v. B. The medieval era—v. C. The early modern period—v. D. The seventeenth and eighteenth centuries—v. E. The nineteenth century—v. F. The twentieth century.

ISBN 0-321-05533-0 (v. A).—ISBN 0-321-16978-6 (v. B).—0-321-16979-4 (v. C).—0-321-16980-8 (v. D).—0-321-17306-6 (v. E).—0-321-05536-5 (v. F).

1. Literature—Collections. 2. Literature—History and criticism.

I. Damrosch, David.
 PN6013.L66 2004
 808.8—dc22

2003061890

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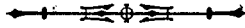
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Early South Asia



WHERE IS "SOUTH ASIA"?

People who live in "South Asia" today began to think that this is where they live only recently, when new international political relations created a conceptual region with this name, made up of eight nation-states: Afghanistan (though this is sometimes omitted), Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, the Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka. For most of history no one thought they lived in South Asia. Instead, some lived in *Al-Hind*, as the geographers who wrote in Arabic named it in the later centuries of the first millennium; earlier, others lived in what they called *Bharata Varsha* ("Realm of the Descendants of Bharata"), according to scholars such as the sage Brihaspati who wrote in Sanskrit:

The earth is 5,000,000 leagues in extent. It contains seven continents and is surrounded by seven oceans. In the middle is the Land of Action, and in the middle of this land is the Rose Apple Tree atop golden Mount Meru. To the north is Mount Himalaya, to the south, extending nine thousand leagues, is the area called Bharata, where good and bad action bear their fruit, and political governance is found. It is a thousand leagues from Badarika in the Himalayas, where the holy Ganga river rises, down to the Bridge that Rama built to the island of Lanka. Seven hundred leagues separate Dvaraka on the western coast, where the god Krishna dwells, from Purushottama, Shalagrama, the great city Puri, on the eastern.

Still others believed they lived in far larger and more complex spaces (see Color Plate 6 for an illustration of one such cosmological map). And some people who live outside what is now called "South Asia" conceived of themselves as living inside it. For example, a "Mount Meru" existed in Java, part of what is now Indonesia, while a "Field of the Kurus," site of the *Mahabharata* war (page 829), was to be found in Khmer country, in today's Cambodia.

It is probable, however, that few people in their everyday lives actually thought of themselves as living even in *Bharata Varsha* or *Al-Hind*, and certainly not in *India*, however much the contours of Brihaspati's space may agree with those of the present-day nation-state. "India" was what Greek and Roman geographers called the region, derived like "Hind" from "Indus," the name of a river in the northwest. And it was this name that was bequeathed to European humanist scholars and the colonialists who came a little later—starting with the Portuguese in the late fifteenth century (see Camões's *Lusiads* in Volume C) and ending with the English, who in 1947 abandoned their "Indian Empire," which was subsequently divided into several of the nations listed above. In the earlier period, people in the region probably saw themselves as living in this village or that, sometimes in the realm of one overlord or another, but rarely in larger spheres. Yet sometimes political power, with its dreams of vast empire, and Sanskrit (and, later, Persian) literary culture, which spread across vast spaces, must have made the names of these and other larger regions come alive in the minds of subjects and readers.

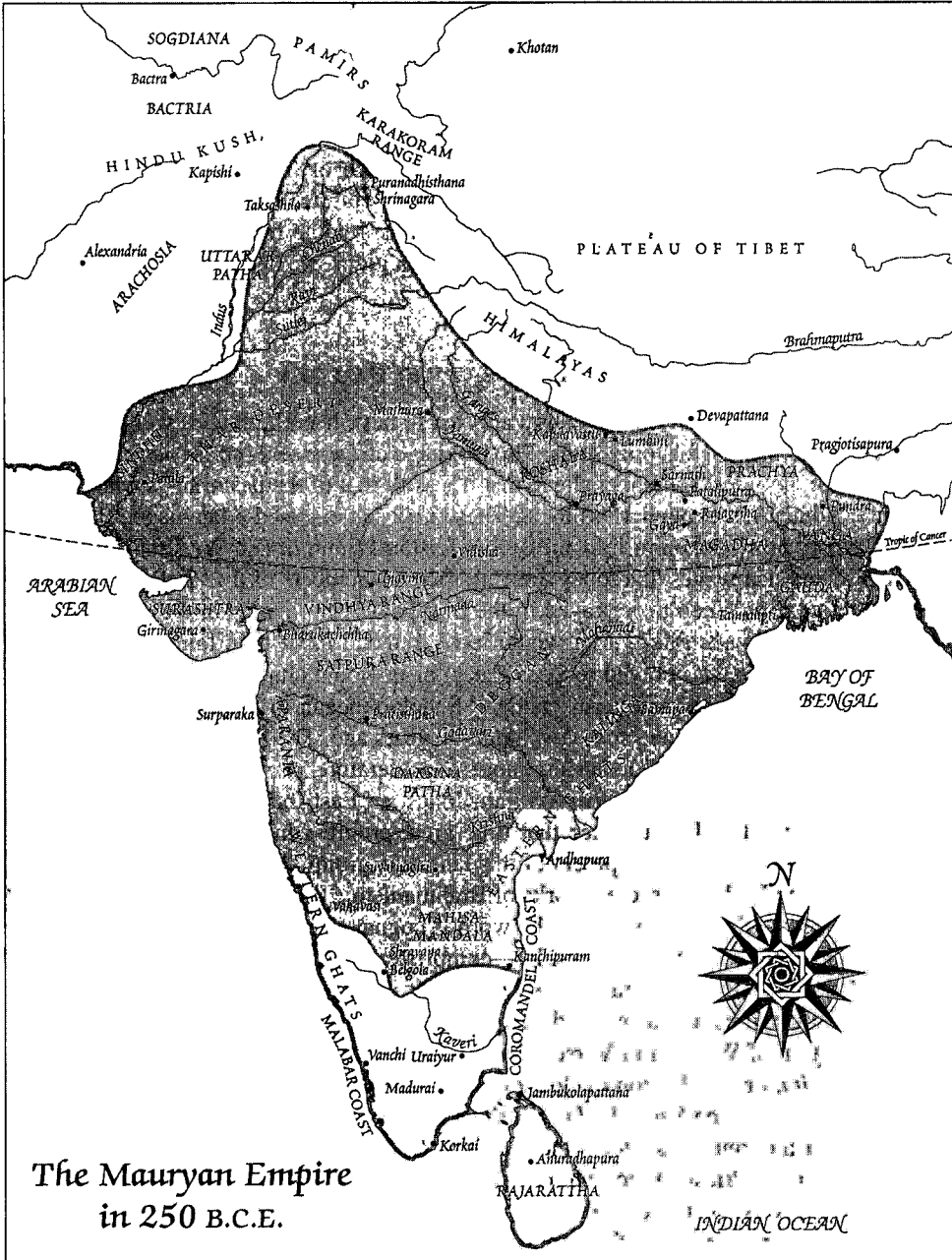
KINGSHIP TO THE HORIZONS

The history of early South Asia until around 500 B.C.E. is obscure and contested. Complex, probably literate urban cultures had existed in the northwest, in the Indus Valley and its environs, from about 2500 to 1500 B.C.E. How these cultures came to an end is not yet fully understood, but when they did end, literacy and urban existence ended with them. The millennium that followed appears to have been dominated by the cultures of shifting cultivators and nomads. Some of these peoples had recently entered the subcontinent from areas to the west, bringing entirely new languages and religious practices that were to be widely assimilated. We don't know much about the history of political power, either, in this period until the middle of the first millennium B.C.E., when city life resumed and when, around the middle of the third century B.C.E., the first written documents in South Asia were produced, at the court of an emperor named Ashoka.

Ashoka was the third king of the Maurya dynasty, the first rulers about whom we possess solid historical information. Greek ambassadors coming in the wake of Alexander the Great's failed invasion (around 320 B.C.E.) visited the Maurya court in Magadha (today's Bihar) and left accounts. More important, a new Indian writing system—based ultimately on Phoenician principles but modified with remarkable skill to suit local language realities—was created at this time, probably by scholars in the chancellery of Ashoka in order to spread the king's moral message (page 874). After this point, documentary evidence becomes much more plentiful. As a result, we know a good deal about Ashoka's vision of power. It was adopted in part from the Achaemenids, the dynasty that ruled in Persia from about 550 to 330 B.C.E., but also much adapted: Ashoka too sought to build an empire, but it was very unlike the Persian model and those that followed it, such as the Roman Empire. The Indian political theory of the day spoke of power radiating outward infinitely—"kingship to the horizons"—but they were not unbounded horizons, as in the Persian case (Xerxes, for example, wanted "to extend the Persian territory as far as God's heaven reaches"). Ashoka sought a limited universality, if we can put it that way: there was a zone beyond which political power was thought not to extend—as Brihaspati makes clear in the excerpt cited earlier—even when cultural and economic power extended much farther, as it most certainly did for all of recorded history in the region.

The Maurya Empire vanished in the second century B.C.E., and about the events of the period that follow we have only a shadowy idea. In southern India, kingdoms now came into being that we can name and place: Chera, Pandya, Chola, ruling from west to east, respectively, in peninsular India, and the Satavahanas, ruling to their north. These polities seem to have been among the first to support the production of written expressive texts, or "literature" (the Mauryas, by contrast, like the Achaemenids they imitated made no literary history at all). In the north of the subcontinent, new claimants for power, the Shakas (Scythians) and Kushanas, entered from central and western Asia. They, too, had notions of rule borrowed from Persian models, but in accordance with the new South Asian paradigm, the empire they sought was a limited one. They also patronized literature, but in ways that were to change the rules of the game of literary culture in the region.

When the Guptas established their polity around 320 C.E. and extended it far outward from the core area around today's Patna (in southern Bihar), many of these tendencies of power and culture found their most coherent expression yet:



The Mauryan Empire
in 250 B.C.E.

INDIAN OCEAN

Om. Hail! The prosperous Samudragupta, the great overlord of lords, exterminator of all kings, without adversary equal to him on earth, whose fame is tasted by the waters of the four oceans. . . .

So begins an inscription of an early Gupta king, but what it goes on to describe is a sphere of governance remarkably similar to Brihaspati's and, indeed, to today's South Asia. This spatial vision of power would mark much of the subsequent history of early South Asia, as would the practices of literary culture, building on the achievements of the Shakas and Kushanas, that were indissociable from this power. To understand that culture and the literature that was its glory, we need to understand their historical development.

POETRY FOR THE POLITY

Although the Indus Valley civilization appears to have been literate as well as urban, it bequeathed us no texts, only seals. The language of these seals so far has eluded decipherment, but most scholars believe that it wasn't that of the pastoralists who began to enter South Asia around 1500 B.C.E. These new settlers used a language related to many others now spoken in Iran and across Eastern, Central, and Western Europe as far as Ireland, languages that today are classified as members of the "Indo-European" language family. When they prayed to the Sky Father, for example, the new settlers used words—"Dyaus Pitā"—that would have sounded more than faintly familiar to people in Greece (who prayed to Zeus Patēr) or in Rome (Jup-piter), and the phrase even resembles our cognate term "father." Scholars began to note such similarities, with growing astonishment, some two hundred years ago. The first was Sirajuddin Ali Khan Arzu, a writer on Persian grammar and literature in mid-eighteenth-century Delhi, and, a generation later, Sir William Jones, an East India Company judge and pioneer English Indologist. Since that time great progress has been made in understanding the historical development of this language group. Among its oldest remaining texts is the Veda, the sacred works of Brahmanism.

The Veda—that is, "wisdom" (the word is cognate with German *wissen*, English "wit," and, indeed, "wisdom" itself)—comprises materials used in the complex liturgy of domestic and communal sacrifices. It is divided into three major collections: one of hymns to various gods and natural phenomena (the *Rig-Veda Samhita*, or "Collection of Wisdom in Verse"); another of sacred mantras in prose (the *Yajur-Veda Samhita*, or "Collection of Wisdom in Formulas"); and a compilation of chants addressed to gods (the *Sama-Veda Samhita*, or "Collection of Wisdom in Melodies"). Later a fourth corpus was added, the *Atharva-Veda Samhita* ("Collection of Wisdom of the Atharvan Priests"), containing disparate materials such as prayers for safety and imprecations for the destruction of enemies. The *Brahmanas*, a large body of prose texts comprising directions for performing the sacred rites, are also considered to be Veda. All these texts were composed and transmitted orally, almost unchanged over the course of some three millennia, thanks to rigorous training in the arts of memory, largely on the part of men of the social order known as Brahmins. It is unsurprising that the language used in these texts would come to be called *sanskrita*, "made fit" or "kept pure" for the ritual. In everyday life people almost certainly did not use Sanskrit but other, grammatically less complex dialects related to Sanskrit. Later, some of these were formalized as literary languages with regional variations

called the Prakrits (literally, the “natural” idioms). In addition to Sanskrit and the Prakrits, the languages of the Dravidian family—Kannada, Malayalam, Tamil, and Telugu—are found in southern India. These came into special prominence in literary culture from about 1000 C.E. onward (see “Crosscurrents: Vernacular Revolutions” in Volume C), though Tamil has a much older textual history.

Much of the Veda is in verse, often the same eleven-syllable meter found in ancient Greek poetry such as Sappho’s (re-created in the English translation “He looks to me to be in heaven, that man” page 597); the composers were called *kavi*, “seer,” which became the term for “poet.” These and other continuities notwithstanding, before the modern period people in South Asia were very careful to distinguish the sacred Veda from what later would be called *kavya* (literally, the “work of the *kavi*”), for which “literature” in our contemporary sense is a good translation. *Kavya* itself was something that had yet to be invented during the Vedic period (the millennium beginning around 1500 B.C.E.). Once invented it was widely acknowledged to be something new and radically different from the Veda. The story of the invention of literature recounted in the first book of the Sanskrit epic poem the *Ramayana* of Valmiki is provided in this volume on page 926; another key moment in the process comes in the fifth book of the poem when Hanuman, the monkey scout in the service of the hero Rama, at last discovers Rama’s queen, Sita. She is being held captive in the distant kingdom of the overlord of demons, Ravana, who had abducted her after disguising himself as a Brahman mendicant and winning her trust when she was left alone. Hanuman puzzles over what language to use to speak with her:

If like a Brahman I address Sita using Sanskrit speech
she may think I am Ravana, and will be frightened.
Far better to speak human language, one that will make sense to her.

It is no accident that in this first recorded use of the word “Sanskrit” for the language, allusion is made to its monopolization by a particular social group, the Brahmins, and also to the peculiar restrictions on its use that distinguished it from “human language.” These features make perfect sense, if we keep in mind the liturgical functions of early Sanskrit. It is, however, Sanskrit that Hanuman uses to speak to Sita, and with this, the poet who has him do so transformed the world of literary culture in South Asia for centuries to come.

The *Ramayana* has been known as the first poem (*adi-kavya*), since at least the second century C.E., and we should take this designation seriously. It embodies the tradition’s own historical judgment, and this understanding has significance whether or not modern scholarship can prove it to be based on hard fact. In the form we know it from manuscripts still available, the *Ramayana* was almost certainly composed in the late Maurya epoch, around 200 B.C.E. The poem shares much of the political perspective of Ashoka, and it reflects on its oral origins (when describing its invention as literature) in a way unlikely in a world truly ignorant of writing, which, as we saw was almost certainly invented at Ashoka’s court.

The second great epic of South Asia, the *Mahabharata*, ascribed to the sage Vyasa, is usually assigned to the genre of history (in Sanskrit, *itihasa*) rather than poetry. It is probable that the *Mahabharata* came into being a century or two before Ashoka though it continued to grow through addition of materials for some centuries even after Valmiki’s work was completed. Like the *Ramayana*, it has as its principal

theme the meaning of power as well as the extent of power—the nature of kingly rule and the limits of the world within which this rule makes sense. Consider how, at the midpoint of the epic (whose name means “The Great Battle of the Men of Bharata”), on the eve of the battle in which his ninety-nine sons will die, the blind old king addresses his confidant and asks him to describe Bharata Varsha:

Oh Sanjaya! Brave kings are ready to die for land. They do not cease from killing but instead fill to overcrowding the house of the dead, in their quest for lordship over earth. What virtues must this earth possess, Sanjaya, speak to me of them—speak to me of this Bharata Varsha, where these armies have gathered, the land my son Duryodhana covets and the sons of Pandu, the land to which my own heart is attached. Speak to me of it!

There follows one of the most complete of the early geographies of South Asia.

In providing what the nineteenth-century philosopher G. W. F. Hegel, without too much anachronism, called “the entire matter of a nation,” these Sanskrit epic traditions bear comparison with the ancient Greek (see the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, pages 233 and 291), for example, or medieval Iberian (see *The Poem of the Cid*, in Volume B). Like these works, the *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata* may deal with particular peoples in particular places, but they contemplate problems that no one anywhere has escaped: war and the perceived need to kill in order to live; duty; family; love. Yet the responses offered by the two South Asian epics to these problems are entirely dissimilar. Many readers today prefer the more steely-eyed, if more agonized, vision of the *Mahabharata*, which leaves us at the end—when the victors, all their kinsmen slain, set out on a death march to the north—with the taste of ashes in our mouth. But societies can’t live by such hard realism alone, and the more utopian vision of the *Ramayana*, where victory brings unending peace and prosperity, seems a necessary supplement. For that very reason, perhaps, it has proved even more consequential in Indian history than the harrowing tale of the *Mahabharata*:

It was because they framed core human problems that Valmiki and Vyasa could offer later writers so vast a store of themes—again as in Greece, where the tragedians were said to eat “crumbs from the great table of Homer.” None of these themes was more celebrated than the story of Shakuntala, which the dramatist Kalidasa (fourth-fifth-century C.E.) rewrote for the new courtly world of the Guptas (see page 966). However, this later literature was very slow to develop. After the Maurya period, rulers everywhere continued to follow Ashoka in eschewing the holy language of Sanskrit for their records and instead using Prakrit. This was also the language used for literature in courts in south-central India such as the Satavahana. Much of this Prakrit literature has been lost, but what has been preserved, such as the seven hundred *Songs of Hala* (see page 953), shows how remarkable and how sophisticated in its simplicity this poetry was. At courts in peninsular India, the literary language in the early centuries of the Common Era appears to have been Tamil. Everywhere we see an avoidance outside the ritual domain of the use of Sanskrit whether for political inscription or literature. This practice came to an end at the courts of the Shakas and Kushanas, who began to issue records in the language and to support poets, especially Buddhist poets such as Ashvaghosha (see page 1048), who wrote in Sanskrit.

Commencing in these early centuries C.E. and continuing in undiminished vigor for a thousand years, Sanskrit poets and scholars produced literature and theory about

literature that dominated the cultural scene in South Asia up to and even beyond the vernacular revolutions in the early centuries of the second millennium, when regional languages began to replace Sanskrit for literary and political purposes. And for all these centuries Sanskrit literary culture exercised a power unlike any other in the region: it radiated across much of Asia, influencing the way literature was written from Tibet at the roof of the world to the island of Bali in the Pacific, offering new themes (some from the *Ramayana* itself; see page 878) and new theorems (especially in the domains of metrics and rhetoric) to poets and scholars as distant as China.

LITERATURE AND THE CRITIC

The poet may make the poem
but the critic knows its true power,
Who better appreciates a woman's beauty,
her father or her lover?

This old saying, still current among traditional Sanskrit scholars in India, expresses one of the most striking features of the literary traditions of early South Asia: their astonishing erudition. The body of reflection on this literature that developed in the centuries after it was created was due to two principal factors. First, the very invention of literature stimulated inquiry into what made it new and so different from the Veda. Second, remarkably sophisticated forms of language analysis had been developed for understanding the Veda—phonetics, metrics, lexicology, and, above all, grammar and hermeneutics—and when these were directed toward the examination of literature, they produced insights of an equally sophisticated sort. It was this critical reflection on literature as much as the literature itself that attracted the attention of scholars across Asia, as it still attracts ours.

Many theorists today reject the idea that "literature" is some essential feature of a text rather than something existing only in the eye of the beholder. We read the works of Plato as philosophy but also as dramatic dialogues, a novel of Tolstoy's as history, and the histories of Michelet as novels. But while the idea of a literary essence has been questioned in modernity, thinkers in early South Asia had no doubt about its existence; they only differed on what precisely this essence was. Everyone accepted two broad distinctions in the world of textuality, one of function and the other of form. The Veda was said to act like a master in giving us commands; ancient lore and legends (*purana*) like a friend in offering us advice; and literature like a lover in seducing us. To these various functions corresponds a set of formal distinctions. In the Veda, the words of the text themselves have central importance (indeed, a mantra is said to be potent in its very wording even if we don't understand what it says); in ancient lore, meaning has primacy, however it may be worded (it was thought that the same idea could be expressed in different words); in literature, both word and meaning are equally significant.

All scholars agreed, then, that literature constituted a unique kind of text and functioned as a kind of language different from other kinds; the hard question concerned the specifics of this constitution. In trying to answer it, scholars for centuries scrutinized every dimension of poetic language, developing brilliant analyses of the

texture of poetic language (especially what were thought of as regional styles), of figures of speech (metaphor, metonymy, and so on), of levels of meaning (denotation, connotation, and suggestion), and of the ways in which language is able to create an emotional experience in the very text itself as well as in the reader or listener (what they called *rasa*, or "taste," something referring not to the judgment of literature as in English but to the emotional experience in or of literature). They examined genre and tried to order the features that distinguished the great types of literature: drama (both historical and fictional), courtly epic, lyric poetry, the tale, the prose biography, and the mixed prose-verse novel. And they analyzed character, providing complex ways to categorize the kinds of heroes and heroines appearing in literary texts and their normative traits: the four kinds of hero (the romantic, the proud, the dignified, and the serene) and the three kinds of heroine (one's own wife, another's, and the courtesan, each of whom can be naive, middling, or sophisticated). In addition to this careful ordering of the stuff of literature, they produced a vast range of handbooks for poets: treatises on metrics, dictionaries (separate works on synonyms, homonyms, words of one syllable, and the like), and grammars galore.

In the thought world of early South Asia, no practice was believed to be possible without the mastery of theory. And so no poet simply looked into his or her heart and wrote; each one was expected to possess vast learning. As a seventh-century critic put it, "There is no kind of speech or discourse, no principle or art that does not find a place in the making of literature. How heavy the writer's burden!" But this is a burden, he went on to add, that all poets take up voluntarily: "It is no sin or crime or sign of weakness not to be a poet. To be a bad poet, however, is to come face to face with death." Nonetheless, like Vatsyayana, the great authority on the art of love, the critic understood there were moments in our experience of literature beyond which "gone is system, and gone is thought," and that only silence is appropriate in the face of certain poems. The sixth-century writer Bhartrihari offers us an example:

I never rightly fixed my thoughts,
 on the foot of God to end rebirth,
 I gained no moral strength of the sort
 to force open the gate of heaven,
 not even in my dreams did I embrace
 the full breasts of a woman—I did
 nothing but act as an axe to lay waste
 the forest of my mother's youth.

LEARNING NEW WAYS OF LIVING AND DYING.

Many stories are told about this Bhartrihari, and they are richly suggestive of the conceptual and emotional world of early South Asia. He is said to have entered into the Buddhist monastic order, quit, and then entered again only to quit once more, poised in an awful balance between asceticism and eroticism—crying out, at the end of his life, "My face is wrinkled, my hair is gray, my legs are weak . . . the only thing still young is my desire!" The mention of Buddhism and the claims of spiritual life opens up an important dimension of early South Asia that we need to register both for what it can and what it cannot tell us about its literature.

The world of Vedic culture was one of punctilious observance of calendrical sacrifices. In time, perhaps around the middle of the first millennium B.C.E., many thinkers began to sense that sacrifice by itself might not encompass the ultimate meaning of human existence; and a true crisis of belief ensued. One response to this crisis was ascetic renunciation and physical self-mortification, which probably drew on archaic practices of bodily discipline and self-denial that had nothing to do with Vedic culture. Another response, among those who remained within the general ambit of ritualism, was a new and profound reflection on life and death; for the first time, we encounter the ideas of redeath and rebirth, or transmigration (*samsara*), in accordance with deeds committed in the previous life (*karma*). The texts in Sanskrit that these thinkers composed, including the Upanishads, played an important role in a more general critique of religious life that emerged among a wide range of spiritual masters on the margins of or outside the Vedic world. Chief among these was Siddhartha Gautama Shakyamuni, the Buddha or "Awakened One" (fourth century B.C.E.), whose new doctrine was summarized in "The Four Noble Truths":

"Suffering" (or "sorrow," *duhkha*): Suffering is an essential part of human life, and we are condemned to experience it over and over in the endless cycle of transmigration;

"The Arising of Suffering": Suffering comes into being under specific circumstances;

"The Ending of Suffering": Because suffering has an origin it must have an end;

"The Way to the Ending of Suffering": There is a real way to stop suffering, and to escape the cycle of rebirth: the teachings of the Buddha.

To this doctrine the Buddha wedded distinctive forms of meditation and new social practices—including the establishment of the monastic community, a sort of parallel society—to produce the most compelling alternative religious vision in the subcontinent, one that, within a very few centuries, was to spread across Asia like wildfire.

Theorists of the Vedic tradition, for their part, sought to synthesize many of these tendencies into a doctrine called—with the now-customary fourfold division—"the four life-goals" and "the four life-stages." According to these idealized schemas, a full human existence required evenhanded consideration of all the major human needs—physical (the goal of desire), socio-economic (that of power and wealth), moral (that of righteousness), and spiritual (that of emancipation from rebirth)—and appropriate times for their satisfaction were apportioned (in studentship, householdership, retirement from society, and wandering mendicancy). Around and about all these more philosophical, even abstract, ways of thinking about life were far more intimate practices of spiritual attachment to gods of various kinds. The world of old India was teeming with the divine, in visible nature, below earth, and in the heavens above. "How many deities are there?" the great Upanishadic sage Yajnavalkya was once asked. "Thirty-three thousand three hundred and thirty-three," he answered in a reply that captures at once this plenitude and the very folly of any attempt at quantification. Chief among the deities were Brahma, Vishnu, and Shiva, who later, according to a more ideal ordering, were sometimes merged into a kind of triple godhead. Brahma bore resonance from the old Vedic world and was often regarded not just as a kind of embodiment of the Veda—the word *brahma* sometimes actually connotes

“Veda”—but as the creator god (since all creation requires knowledge, and the creation of the universe requires total knowledge, which the Veda purports to provide). Vishnu was seen as the sustainer of the cosmos (see Color plate 7, where Vishnu is shown reposing on the cosmic serpent Shesha), and a theory of his *avatara*, or descent, into earthly forms was developed. The theory of avatars made it possible to absorb once-independent divinities (such as Krishna) into a single pan-Indian deity and to explain the god’s active role in the functioning of the universe. The third chief god, Shiva, was viewed as the dissolver—a beneficent destroyer, since all things must end. He may be the most complex of all these deities in both his history and character. He combined features of eroticism and asceticism where the true complexity of human life—the life that the poet Bhartrihari expresses most poignantly—could find its most perfect divine projection.

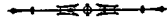
Religious thinking from these various traditions has naturally conditioned South Asian literary culture in many overt and subtle ways. Consider two of the masterpieces of Sanskrit literature, Valmiki’s *Ramayana* and Kalidasa’s *Shakuntala*. It may have been only centuries after the composition of the *Ramayana* that the hero came to be considered an avatar of Vishnu, but in the very core of the narrative can be found a vision of a divine king: it is only the conjunction of his godly nature with political power that can arrest the energies of chaos depicted with awesome force in the *Mahabharata*. Kalidasa’s drama is a tale about love and loss and recovery, but the drama’s narrative is also constructed according to the template of Shiva mythology with, again, important connotations for the exercise of political power and the special importance of the Realm of the Descendants of Bharata. But if religious sentiment plays an undeniably significant role in Sanskrit literature, we must be careful not to exaggerate its shaping power. Among the earliest courtly poems in Sanskrit are those on the life of the Buddha produced by the poet Ashvaghosha (probably around 150 C.E.), but when Ashvaghosha and other Buddhists wrote Sanskrit literature, they did so as poets first and Buddhists second. It is hard to identify a “Buddhist aesthetic”; what we have instead is a Sanskrit aesthetic, which transcended religious affiliation: as the great scholar-king Bhoja noted around 1050, “Literature is for all creeds.” Beyond this, there were vast realms of literary culture in early South Asia as far removed from the spiritual as it is possible to go. The early Tamil poets, who wrote of the “interior landscape” and the “external landscape” (the affairs of the heart and of the world), the literary theoreticians who contemplated the nature of meaning and expressive emotion, the erotic and confessional poets, and the writers of comic novels and farcical plays all understood that literature was very much a cultural and social practice of this world, parallel at times to the divine but different—and one that had its own unique powers. As one anonymous Sanskrit poet wrote,

The gods are in heaven and we live here on earth.
Who is there then to answer our question:
Which is sweeter, the taste of poetry,
or the drink of immortality?

PRONUNCIATIONS:

Atharva-Veda Samhita: uh-THAHR-wuh-VAY-duh SUM-hi-TAH

Bharāta Varshā: BHĀH-ruh-tuh VĀHR-shiuh
dharmā: DĀHR-muh
duhkha: DOOH-khuh
itihāsa: ee-tee-HĀH-suh
Kalidasa: KĀH-lee-DAH-suh
kavya: KĀHV-yuh
Mahabharata: muh-HĀH-BĀH-ruh-tuh
purāna: poor-AH-nuh
Ramayana: RAH-MAH-yuh-nuh
rasa: RUH-suh
Rig-Veda Samhitā: REEG-VAY-duh SUM-hi-TAH
samsara: sum-SĀH-ruh
Sama-Veda Samhitā: SAH-muh-VAY-duh SUM-hi-TAH
Shakuntala, the play: SHAH;KOON-tuh-luh
Shakuntala, the heroine: shuh-KOON-tuh-LAH
Yajur-Veda Samhitā: yuh-joor-VAY-duh SUM-hi-TAH



The Mahabharata of Vyasa

last centuries B.C.E.—earlier centuries C.E.

“The law is a subtle thing,” the venerable grandfather Bhishma repeatedly declares in the *Mahabharata*, and with this he expresses the central problem of the central and most problematic work in the history of Indian literature. The *Mahabharata*, or “Great Battle of the Men of Bharata,” is indeed great both for its size and its argument. It has traditionally been calculated to contain 100,000 quatrains (of thirty-two syllables each), which makes it about seven times the size of the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* combined (with their 30,000 sixteen-syllable lines). Even more decidedly than the Greek and other foundational epics, the *Mahabharata* seeks to offer a total account of a culture. The text itself announces at the start, “Whatever is found here may well be found elsewhere; what is not here is nowhere.” The scholar and translator J. A. B. van Buitenen drew an apt analogy for the work from the tradition of European literature: he invites us to imagine a combined text including the *Iliad*, somewhat more loosely structured; an abbreviated version of the *Odyssey* (the *Mahabharata* contains a version of the *Ramayana*); quite a bit of Hesiod’s account of the birth of the gods; some sequences adapted from Herodotus’s history; many passages adapted and transformed from the pre-Socratic philosophers; Socrates by way of Plato by way of Plotinus, the third-century pantheist; and a generous selection of the Gospels by way of moralizing stories. This would seem absurd in the West, he adds, but the *Mahabharata* actually exists. And, we should quickly note, it exists not as a jumbled anthology but with parts conjoined into a narrative whole that never loses sight of the story it has to tell.

It is a great story, too—if one of the most harrowing in world literature—that the *Mahabharata* tells. Its theme is the nature and fundamental contradictions of political power, and in recounting the struggle for the throne between two groups of first cousins, the poem shows how thoroughly power is permeated by uncertainty and even paradox. The more the cousins strive to understand the law, to understand *dharma*—what is right, what one’s duty is—the more confused the law appears to them; the more intense their quest for peace, the more inevitable the war between them; and the more secure their hold on victory, the more the victors realize they have lost. “We now live,” they say at the moment of their triumph, “dead in life.”