Chapter 2

Epics, *Itihasas, Kavyas* and *Kappiyams*

2.1 Epics: An Introduction

2.2 History of Western Epics
   2.2.1 Earliest Epics
   2.2.2 Homeric Epics
   2.2.3 Other Greek Epics
   2.2.4 Epics of Rome
   2.2.5 Influence of Christianity
   2.2.6 Epics of the Medieval Period
   2.2.7 Renaissance Period
   2.2.8 Seventeenth Century and After

2.3 Types of Epics
   2.3.1 Primary Epics
   2.3.2 Secondary Epics
   2.3.3 Epic Framework

2.4 *Itihasas*
   2.4.1 The Ramayana
   2.4.2 The Mahabharata
   2.4.3 *Puranas*

2.5 *Kavyas*
   2.5.1 *Kavyas* and *Mahakavyas*
   2.5.2 Epic Framework of Sanskrit Rhetoricians
   2.5.3 Important Authors and Their Works
   2.5.4 *Pancha-Mahakavyas*
   2.5.5 Important Features of Sanskrit *Mahakavyas*

2.6 *Kappiyams*
   2.6.1 Silappathikaram, Manimekalai and Perunkathai
   2.6.2 Seevaka Sinthamani and Soolamani
   2.6.3 Kamparamayanam and Periyapuranam
   2.6.4 Seerapuram, Thempavani and Iradchanya Yathirikam

References
2.1 Epics: An Introduction

The word epic is derived from the Greek word *epos* which originally had the meaning 'word', later on it evolved to mean speech or tale or a song and finally to mean poetry about the deeds of a heroic figure. The epic can be defined as 'a long narrative poem majestic in theme and style. Epics deal with legendary or historical events of national and universal significance involving action of broad sweep and grandeur' (Funk & Wagnalls New Encyclopedia, 1971, p317).

Bowra (1945) defines the epic as follows: 'An epic poem is by common consent a narrative of some length and deals with events which have a certain grandeur and importance and come from a life action especially of violent action such as war'. The word epic is associated with an idea of vastness. The grandeur, which is one of the features of the epic, is related not only to the grand style but also to the subject matter.

An epic is a long narrative poem, on a grand scale about the deeds of warriors and heroes. It is a polygonal, heroic story incorporating myth, legend, folk tale and history. Epics are often of national significance in the sense they embody the history and aspirations of a nation in a lofty and grandiose manner (Cuddon, 1977).

Though in modern times we have epics in poetry, prose, theatrical performance and in film, originally the epics were narrative poems on a particular character or a civilisation. The epics are encyclopaedic poetic works, which bring out the social and religious values of a society and its laws and customs.

Shaw (1972) lists seven main characteristics of the epic. They are:

1. Setting - remote in time and space.
2. Style - objective, lofty, and dignified.
3. Plot - simple.
4. Central incident or series of incidents - dealing with legendary or traditional material.
7. Supernatural forces entering the action.

Lucas (1950), in his entry 'Epic' in *Chambers' Encyclopaedia*, gives a summary of the essential qualities of an epic:

Unity of action, rapidity, the art of beginning in the middle; the use of the supernatural, of prophecy, of the underworld; the ornamental simile, the recurrent epithet; and above all, a nobility truthful, unstrained, incomparable except at moments in the sagas of the North.

2.2 History of Western Epics

2.2.1 Earliest Epics

The earliest known epics belong to ancient Babylon. The *Creation Epic*, believed to belong to the first half of second millennium BC, deals with the struggle between the cosmic order and the primeval chaos. It recounts the creation of Gods, the formation of the universe, the establishment of the power of the god Marduk and the creation of man.

*The Epic Gilgamesh* belongs to the same period. It marks a development in the epic poetry where unlike in *The Creation Epic* the hero is not a god but two-thirds god and one-third man. This epic concerns the various adventures of Gilgamesh and his friend who is an alter ego to the hero. The many battles they fight, the conflict they face and the fruitless search of Gilgamesh for immortality are believed to be a series of tales from the older Sumerian tradition. There are many elements in this epic such as the great quest, the temptress, the perilous journey, the great conflict and the descent into the underworld, which have been taken up by the later epic writers and have become an integral part of their epics.
The full texts of these two ancient epics along with schedule of events on the Babylonian New Year festival are preserved in clay tablets even today. These two epics form a background to the oldest parts of the Bible and the Homeric epics (Lord, 1983).

2.2.2 Homeric Epics

The Homeric epics, the Iliad and the Odyssey, belonging to the 7th century BC, mark the beginning of western literature. Homer makes use of the oral epic songs that were traditionally sung by the bards of his time. These songs, which were more than a thousand years old, were about the deeds of the Greek heroes of the Trojan War. Around this historical Trojan War was a group of tales with the theme of journey, wanderings and return. In the Homeric epic, there is a distinct breaking away from the earlier tradition. The heroes of the Homeric epics are not gods or demigods; they are depicted as ordinary human beings with heroic energy and power. Homer endeavours to highlight the superiority of his hero as a man.

Homer’s Iliad and Odyssey are versions of the heroic temper from an individualistic age in which the glory and sacrifice involved in chosen exploits bring honour to the hero and redeem the brevity of life... Both are profound and yet sharply delineated figures spontaneous and natural. (Cesare, 1983, pp500-502).

The Iliad, in its structure of balanced episodes and motifs corresponds to the design of the Athenian poetry of the Geometric period, whereas the Odyssey is very much akin to the structure of The Epic of Gilgamesh. These two epics are in dactylic hexametre probably the traditional metre the bards used for centuries to preserve in memory the heroic deeds of their great heroes.

2.2.3 Other Greek Epics

Very little has survived of the other Greek epic Argonautian of the 3rd century BC. This short epic in four books is by Apollonius of Rhodes. It is of the journey of Jason
with his crew in quest of the Golden Fleece and the love story of Jason and Media. This was one of the favoured tales in ancient Greece. Though the style of this short epic is highly polished, it lacks the energy, the dramatic quality, and the heroic characters of the Homeric epics.

Hesiod's *Theogony* contains the epic songs of the beginning of things, the creation of the universe, and the classification of the gods. These songs belong to the Greek epic cycle. The tales from these cycles were later made use of by the Greek dramatists for the tragedies. Hesiod also composed another epic *Works and Day*. The didactic epic gives advice and instructions on farming as well as the ways and means to succeed by honest dealings. *The War of the Titans*, the full text of which is lost, is also ascribed to Hesiod.

2.2.4 Epics of Rome

Though there may have been an oral epic tradition in Rome, nothing of it has survived. As in many other things, the Romans imitated the Greeks in their literature too. However, while the Greeks were mythological and heroic in their epics, the Romans were historical. The first known Roman epic belongs to the 3rd century BC. *Bellum Punic* is a long poem in the Saturnian verse on the first Punic war by Gnaeus Naevius. During the same time Livius Andronic translated the *Odyssey* in the Saturnian verse. Quintus Ennius used the dactylic hexametre borrowed from the Greeks in his *Annals*, which is on the history of Rome.

The great Latin epic was written between 29 and 19 BC. The emperor Augustus is said to have suggested to Virgil that he compose an epic celebrating Aeneas' founding of the so-called New Troy and set forth the origins to the Roman people. (*Dictionary of World Biography*, 1998).

*The Aeneid* is a blending of the Greek and Roman epic tradition. Though Virgil followed Homer in his structure, episodes and phraseology, his conceptions were far removed from those of Homer. 'An individualistic code of honour that often operated against the interest of the society' (*New Encyclopaedia Britannica*, Vol. III, 1977b) was
not accepted in a more sophisticated Rome of Virgil. Thus his story becomes subservient
to the abstract theme of Roman civic virtue without making his hero ‘an instrument of
nationalistic propaganda’ (Encyclopedia Americana, Vol. 10, 1983). Despite the fact that
Aeneas fulfils the destiny imposed on him, he also defines and maintains human values.
The epic expresses a desire for peace balanced against the traditional reverence for
military virtue.

Many attempted to follow Virgil in composing epics. In the 1st century AD, Statius
authored Thebaid narrating the war between the sons of Oedipus. The lack of design and
conviction in comparison to the Virgilian epic caused its failure as an epic. Valerius
Flaccus’ Argonautica and Silius Italicus’ Punic differ from Virgil in the fact that they go
back to the Roman annalistic tradition.

The vastness and grandeur of the Virgilian epic was successfully attempted by Lucan
in his epic De Bello Civili. However, Lucan’s style is highly rhetorical and his ideology
is that of the stoic republican. Almost all these poems are concerned with the struggle
between good and evil, which frames the model for the Christian epic that was to follow.
Claudian’s Rape of Proserpine conventionally marks the end of the Latin epic tradition.

2.2.5 Influence of Christianity

The epic tradition underwent a gradual modification with the rise of Christianity.
Under the Christian influence, the epic became the medium for theological and moral
expression. The new subject matters for the epic were now the saints’ lives and the
scriptural stories. These themes, though allowing the conventional epic elements of war,
quest, history and heroic dimension of the heroes, denied the tragic possibilities. The
ultimatum of Christian epics was the Holy Roman Empire and the City of God.

In the 4th century AD Juvencus paraphrased the gospel Evangeliorum Libri. With the
Christian influence, the Greek and Roman mythologies were replaced by Christian myths
on the literary scenario. This continued through the next century too; during the 5th
century AD two Christian epics were composed namely *Carmen Paschale* of Sculis and *Psychomachia* of Prudentius.

During the 4th and 5th centuries, there was a revival of the Greek epics. Quintius Smyruadus' *Posthomeriea* and Nonnu's *Dionysiaca* are works attempted in the epic structure on contemporary history.

The postclassical epics with the traditional frame work of war and quest became the medium for theological and moral instruction. In *Praise of God* the lives of Saints as in the Acts took the place of the earlier pagan subjects. The heroes of the Christian epics were a mixture of the old and the new, possessing the heroic proportions but without the tragic possibility of their Greek and Roman counterparts. ‘The fortunes of the new hero were identified with the Holy Roman Empire and the City of God’ (Cesare, 1983, p501-502).

2.2.6 Epics of the Medieval Period

From the 10th century onwards, the vernacular epics with a pre-eminence of heroic poetry became popular. A whole host of mythic-heroic poems can be cited in the medieval period. Throughout Europe, there was an abundance of such epics with an admixture of the Christian and the pagan elements. The most important works among them are: the Anglo-Saxon *Beowulf*, the Old French *Chanson de Geste*, which is best represented in *Chanson de Roland*, the Old Spanish poem of the *Cid*, the Old Norse *Elder Edda*, the Middle High German *Nibelungenlied* and the Greek *Digenis Akritas*.

*Beowulf* is of a hero who defends his civilisation against the two characters of an antique age. It represents a world of fire-eating monsters and dragons as well as a heroic world with its feudal code of conduct and a strong Christian perspective.

‘The Old French *Chanson de Geste* is based on Christian values and idealism and is distinctively different from the chivalric heroes of the later period. The historical event of
the defeat of the rear guard of Charlemagne at Roncevaux in 778 AD became the basis for the Chanson de Roland. Another historical figure to become the hero of a national epic is Rodrigo Diaz de Vivar (1043-1099 AD) of Spain. The poem Cid celebrates the deeds of this man who was a celebrated hero even in his lifetime. He was the symbol and personification of the hopes and aspirations of the Spanish nation of his time.

The Greek Digenis Akritas is a combination of the mythic and the Christian themes. The hero, the son of a Muslim father and a Christian mother has the mythic protagonist's quality, fighting battles with dragons and giants.

2.2.7 Renaissance Epics

During the 12th and 13th centuries, the Metrical Romances became very popular throughout Europe. They form a link between the postclassical epics and the Renaissance epics. The popular stories of these long narratives were those of Alexander the Great from the Romans d' Alisaundre and the Arthurian lore of Brittany. In Greece too the Metrical Romances found popularity during these centuries.

At the opening of the 14th century stands Dante's La Divina Comedia, of which the question is raised whether it should be classified as an epic on the basis that it is not a heroic poem. However, it has the ancient epic subject of the journey taken to the underworld in quest of knowledge to renew life. Petrach's Africa in Latin represents the many classical epics during this period. It is a more conventional epic than that of Dante. It is a historical epic of the ancient hero Scipio Africanus. But this work of Petrach is not what he is remembered for as it did not bring him the fame that his sonnets brought him. Boccaccio wrote three epics in the Romantic mode: Filocolo, IL Filosserato and Tescide. These epics of Baccaccio were very successful unlike that of Petrarch.

The later Renaissance epics were more romantic than heroic in nature. In these epics the heroic was subordinated to the romantic and they were episodic in form. Matteo Boiardo took the subject matter for his epic from the Roland tradition. His Orlando
Innamorato is an unfinished work. Lodovico Ariosto wrote a sequel to this entitled Orlando Furioso. It was published twice, first in 1513 with 40 cantos and then with 46 cantos in 1532. Tasso combined the classical and the Christian in his Gerusalemme Liberate. The hero is the historical Godfrey of Bouillon, one of the leaders of the first Crusaders in 1096. In this epic the romance of Rinado and Armida is blended with the historical theme of the Holy War.

Camoens ventures into the use of the epic form to tell the history of his nation. His Lusiads recounts the journey of Vasco da Gama to India, the greatness of the Portuguese Empire and the spreading of the Christian faith. Overcoming the Christian and Muslim heretics was the main issue of the epic.

Edmund Spencer’s Faerie Queen stands in the same quandary as Dante’s La Divina Comedia. For it is an amalgam of romance, allegory and religious propaganda. It is made up of six books and each is a romance in the episodic form; and it has the epic and the romantic situation and setting. The stories of Ariosto and Tasso and those from Arthurian legends, the Chanson de Geste and other European tales are to be found in Spencer’s Faerie Queen.

In Spain and France too the epic became popular during this era. Alonns de Ercilla y Zuniga wrote Araucana on the Spanish conquest of South America. La Franciade by Pierre Ronsard was published unfinished in 1572.

2.2.8 Seventeenth Century and After

The exclusive venture on the epic in the 17th century was John Milton’s Paradise Lost. Like Virgil, Milton too wanted to write a historical epic but rejected it for a biblical theme. His epic returned to the classical framework of the creation of the universe, the war of the heavenly powers and the theme of journeys. ‘In Adam, Milton fashioned a new type of hero and completed the tradition of the heroic’ (Cesare, 1983, pp500-502).
Though the Augustan poets had great admiration for the classicists, none other than Dryden attempted the epic style. Pope's *Rape of the Lock* is a skilful burlesque of the epic form. Byron's *Don Juan* is similar to Pope's work in its stylistic nature (Merchant, 1971).

With the emphasis on lyrical poetry during the Romantic age, the epic began to decline. During this period, interest was also directed towards finding ancient and medieval texts and publishing them. In England, Scotland, Ireland and Scandinavian countries ballads, both narrative and heroic, were still very much alive in the oral tradition. These ballads were published, many of them for the first time. Various attempts were made to put together popular ballads and 'make' an epic. In 1849, the Finish national epic *Kalevala* was published by the compilation of traditional oral poems.

In the 18th century, the accentuation was on the establishment of the rules of epic poetry rather than of the composition of it. Considerable critical energy was spent on the concept of the unity of the Homeric epics and on trying to establish the true authorship of them. Those few epics that were composed went back to the ancient classical subjects as in Lord Macaulay's *Lays of Ancient Rome*. During the 19th century no epic of originality was created. Keats' *Hyperion*, Tennyson's *Idylls of the King*, Arnold's *Balder Dead* and William Morris's *Life and Death of Jason* are works based on the older epics. They can be classified as epic imitations.

In Russia, in the beginning of the 20th century, Slavic Balkan and South Slavs' historical songs, mythic heroic tales of battles were collected from the oral tradition, which was very much alive among these people. In the 20th century the epic form was transmitted from the poetry to the novel as well as to the screen and stage.
2.3 Types of Epics

The epics may be classified as oral or primary epics and written or secondary epics. The oral or primary epics are also known as folk, popular, true or authentic epics or epics of growth. The written or secondary epics are sometimes referred to as literary or artificial epics or epics of art. Commenting on the classification of the epics Bowra says,

Such a distinction may invite distrust. For in the fine arts no rules are binding, and it is dangerous to be too precise in saying what a thing is or what it ought to be... While the 'authentic' suggests the wild wood-notes of pure poetry, the inspired, direct and unpremeditated song of the poet whom culture has not corrupted, 'literary' suggests the derivation and the manufactured, the poverty of le vers calcute against the wealth of la vers donné the reliance on books instead of life.... (Bowra, 1945).

2.3.1 Primary Epics

The primary epics are those, which have developed into its final form through orally transmitted folk poetry. These poems are stories of legendary events. These events usually took place a long time before and had undergone several changes in their context before appearing in the epic form. Many versions of the same events are also to be found due to the fact that they were treated in folk songs and had travelled many regions before they reached the epic form. These folk songs were eventually written down by anonymous poets.

The oral epics are composed for recitation; therefore they have a free and loose structure. The oral epics contain many episodes that can be taken as individual units. The oral poets had to store in their minds various plots and the residue of the different points of the episodes. They had to have the skill to narrate any of these episodes complete in itself when requested. Lord says of the oral epics,

Oral poetry means poetry composed in oral performance by unlettered bards. It depends on improvisation with the help of formulas, but formulas are not to be understood as actual phrases. They are rather a
pattern for the poetry - syntactic, metric even acoustic patterns. The work itself is a rehearsing or re-composition rather than a performance from memory. The sung epic relied heavily on the Germanic song. This is the essential core of the ideas that survive performance and reinterpretations' (Lord, 1983, pp268-271).

In the oral epic stock phrases, fixed epithets, stereotyped descriptions, and conventional themes are used. These features are usually referred to as epic formula. The use of the epic formula has a two-fold function in the oral epics. It assists the poet in the recitation of the epic by lightening his task of memorising and reciting the entire story. It also helps the audience by making it easier to follow the story.

To a great extent, formulas dominate the content of an epic. As there are formulas for going to bed and getting up, putting on and taking off the armour, sacrificing or feasting,... These are activities the epic deals with most often. The effect of familiarity is often enhanced by direct repetitions when a messenger repeats verbatim to B instructions previously issued by A (New Encyclopaedia Britannica, Vol. III, 1977a, p920).

Homer in his Odyssey gives the actual condition of the performance of the recital of the epic in the Greek tradition.

'A herald soon came bringing the famous singer
Whom the muse had befriended, giving good with evil:
She had taken his eyes, but left him the gift of sweet song.
Pontonous placed a silver chair among the banqueters
Close to the short pillar and there
He hung form a nail the melodious lyre,
Just there, above his head, guiding his hand
To where it was.

(Odyssey 8: 62 - 69)
In this description of the real performance of the epic by a blind poet, Merchant (1998) sees three types of symbolism. He says that the blindness of the poet may symbolise:

1. The poetic use of imagination and memory so important to an oral poet.
2. It may reflect the sociological circumstances; the blind man is at an advantage in the difficult task of impromptu composition.
3. The poet described here is actually blind.

The idea that the poet is self-taught and that he is prompted by god is also stressed by Homer in *Odyssey*.

### 2.3.2 Secondary Epics

The secondary (literary or written) epics are works of a single known author. These epics are meant to be read unlike the oral epics which are essentially improvised recitations. The earliest literary epics though developed into an independent form held on to many of the features of the oral epics. They were mainly heroic and mythic tales. While the oral epic’s main characteristics were simplicity and straightforwardness of narration, the literary epic emphasises the poet’s skill in richness of language and style. For the poet of the literary epic the devices of oral poetry are useful only for their antiquated elegance. They no longer hold a utilitarian value.

The literary epics belonged to a culture altogether different from the oral epics which reflected a society which had ‘ingenious admiration for the extroverted deeds of rugged individuals or accepted an individual code of honour’ (*New Encyclopaedia Britannica* Vol. III, 1977b, p921). The Literary epics belonged to a society, which had become more sophisticated; therefore, these epics were more carefully designed and had a complex psychological pattern than that of the oral epics.

In the western epic tradition Virgil’s epic, which imitated Homer in structure, episodes and phraseology, has become the fixed standard canon for the literary epics.
In the Indian literary scene too a similar difference can be seen between the true epics (*itihasas*) and the artificial epics (*mahakavyas*). The *mahakavyas* are more comprehensive and the manner in which the poet narrates the story too is different. The emphasis was on the display of the poet’s skill in the use of the language; the lyrical description in the *mahakavya* was as important as the narration. The handling of the metre too was different in the authentic epics and the *mahakavyas*. These are discussed in detail in Section 2.5.

2.3.3 Epic Framework


1. The epic of the return
2. The epic of wrath
3. The analogical epic
4. The contrast epic

The epic of the return and the epic of wrath are formed by the dialectic cycle of bondage, exile, continuing war or destruction by fire or water. The movement of these cycles is first down and then up to a permanently redeemed world. The classical epics are mostly in the cyclical form. *Odyssey* and *Aeneid* belong to the tradition of the epic of the return. In *Odyssey* the hero arrives home, after incredible perils, to claim his bride and baffle the villains. In *Aeneid* the tradition of the epic of the return is one of rebirth. The new Troy being the starting point renewed and transformed by the hero’s quest. *Iliad* on the other hand, is an example of the epic of wrath. *Iliad* illustrates the fall of an enemy, no less than that of a friend or leader, is tragic and not comic.

In the Christian epics the theme of the epic of return and the epic of wrath are dealt with in a wider and archetypal contrast. The cycle of life and rebirth, pre-existence, life-
in-death and resurrection of the Messianic cycle forms the framework of the analogical epic.

Fry (1990) sees the contrast epic in its embryonic form in the law books and the creation myths, where man is a victim of injustice or exile at one pole and the law laid down by the sacred book at the other pole. *Gilgamesh, Langland* and *Divine Comedia* (the reverse of the structure) are identified under the framework of contrast epic.

### 2.4. Itihasas

The age of the epics in Sanskrit poetic tradition is placed between the Vedic age and the classical age. The Vedic age is usually dated between 2000 BC and 500 BC (Shipley, 1970, Dictionary of Literary Terms, Oxford). The epic age is between 500 BC and 50 BC (Macdonell, A.A. 2004, p188). The Sanskrit epic poetry falls into two main classes: (i) The *itihasas* and *puranas*, and (ii) The *mahakavyas*. The two great Indian epics *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata* are usually categorised as *itihasa*. *Itihasa* as the word itself indicates a record of events (*iti* - thus, *ha* - verily, *sa* - was) *Itihasas* and *puranas* were important literary forms during the later Vedic period and the early classical period. *Itihasas* were originally a group or collection of legends connected with the Vedic hymns. Very little has survived of these legends. Whatever has survived has been incorporated into the *Mahabharata*, which is known as the fifth Veda.

Aurobindo says of the *itihasa* as ‘The *itihasa* was an ancient historical or legendary tradition turned into creative use as significant myths of tales expressing of some spiritual or religious or ethical or ideal meaning and thus formative of the minds of the people’. The *itihasas* and the *puranas* were recited during great sacrifices like the *rajasuya* and *asvametha*. It is said that Valmiki taught his completed epic - the *Ramayana* - to his pupils Lava and Kusha, the two sons of Rama, who were born and brought up in his hermitage as a result of Sita’s banishment. Moreover, they sang the epic for the first time in the distinguished assembly of Rama during the horse sacrifice.
The Mahabharata was taught by Vyasa to his disciples. Vaisampayana one of the disciples recited it, in the presence Vyasa, during the snake sacrifice of Janmajeya. Sauti who heard this recitation in turn recited it to the sages in the Naimisa forest. The recital of the epics was taken up by the sutas who were professional bards of the royal court. They were also charioteers who had the opportunity to witness the battle scenes they sang about. It was through these professional bards that the epics reached the masses. The kusilavas, the travelling singers, also played a significant role in presenting the epics to the public. They took the epics from one region to another with them.

2.4.1 The Ramayana

Among the two epics, the Ramayana is believed to be the older. It is held that the Ramayana attained the present form around the 2nd or 3rd century BC. In comparison to Mahabharata the Ramayana is much smaller, consisting of 24,000 stanzas and divided into seven books. Ramayana is known as adikavya - it being the first secular poem to be composed in Sanskrit. Valmiki, moved by pity at the death of one of the pair of birds and the wailing of the other, spontaneously uttered the following stanza cursing the hunter who killed the bird.

‘No fame be thine for endless time,
Because, base outcast, of thy crime,
Whose cruel hand was fain to slay,
One of this gentle pair at play’

(Translated by Griffith, 1915)

Thus the sloka metre was formed and the adikavi exploited the newly invented metre in his epic Ramayana.

There are many theories about the origin of Ramayana. According to Weber (1882), Ramayana is an allegory on 'the spread of the Aryan civilization towards the south, more especially to Ceylon. The characters are not real historical figures, but merely
personifications of certain occurrences and situation’. He is of the opinion that Ramayana of Valmiki is based on the Dasaratha Jataka. Weber’s theory that Ramayana is symbolic of the conflict between Brahmanism and Buddhism is rejected by some scholars on the basis that the Rakshasas, although opposed to the Brahmanas, could not be identified with Buddhism in any way.

Muller (1859) is of the assumption that though the epic does not belong to the Vedic age the legend and the characters that are found in them can be traced back to that age. The traditional view is that Ramayana is historical, that it is an entire work and that the stories of Ravana and Hanuman are not independent stories that were added at a later stage. Scholars like Bulcke and Sen are of this opinion. They see these episodes as, ‘the marvellous, the fantastic and the supernatural as elements that are essential to the artistic effort of the epic’.

Valmiki called his epic as a kavya and so it is established in the Indian poetics. The kavyas and the mahakavyas represent the sentiments of love, heroism and pity as in Ramayana; and deal with dharma, artha and kama as in Ramayana. Ramayana is looked upon as a dharmasastra in the sense that it expounds the varieties of duties and the ideals of good conduct. The fact that it deals with polity, administration, diplomacy and war makes it a work on arthasastra. Dealing with lofty ethical ideals of Indian culture such as simple living, modesty, obedience to elders, restraint and humility makes the epic a nithisastra.

There are two recensions of Ramayana: the northern recension and the southern recension. These are subdivided into three more groups. The northern recension has the northeastern, the northwestern and the western versions. The southern recension comprises of the Telugu, the Grantha and the Malayalam versions. The northern versions differ widely from one another. But the southern version is said to have preserved the text in its original or older form (Pusalker, 1962).
2.4.2 The Mahabharata

Though the Ramayana is considered to be older than the Mahabharata it is believed that the epic nucleus of Mahabharata is far older than Ramayana. The traditional view is that Vyasa composed the 'Bharata' of 24,000 stanzas, whereas the Mahabharata of 100,000 stanzas is to be the work of sutas (Pusalker, 1955).

The western orientalists are of the view that a period of almost eight centuries can be ascribed to the growth of Mahabharata. The main story of the victory of the Pandavas in the Bharata war was called 'Jaya', the text of which consisted of 8,000 to 10,000 slokas. There is a theory that this popular narrative turned into a ballad by wandering minstrels who later turned it into a much longer poem with 24,000 slokas, called 'Bharata'. The 'Bharata' along with the stanzas of 'Jaya' had an addition of a brief account of the origin of the Bharata race and an enlargement on the war between the Pandavas and the Kuravas. Between the 4th century BC and the 4th century AD the Mahabharata grew into its present form of 100,000 slokas. A large number of fables, narratives, episodes and moral, philosophic, religious and political discourses were added to the original nucleus of the story.

Many western scholars have attempted to trace the origin of Mahabharata. The first western scholar to do extensive research on Mahabharata was Lessen. In 1837 he expressed the view that Mahabharata was a pre-Buddhist work belonging to 400 - 450 BC. ‘According to him the original epic was augmented thereafter by interpolating of a Krsnite nature alone’ (Pusalker, 1955).

Weber, after analysing the contents of Mahabharata, states,

Of the Mahabharata in its extant form, only about one fourth (some 20,000 slokas or so) relates to this conflict and the myths that have been associated with it; while the elements comprising the remaining three-fourths do not belong to it at all, and have only the loosest possible connection therewith, as well as with each other. These later additions are of two kinds. Some are of epic character, and are due to the endeavour to
unite here, as in a single focus, all the ancient legends it was possible to muster; - and amongst them as a matter of fact, are not a few that are tolerably antique even in respect of form. Others are of purely didactic import, and have been inserted with the view of imparting to the military caste, for which the work was mainly intended, all possible instructions as to its duties .... Even at the portion which is recognizable as the original basis - that relating to the war - many generations must have laboured before the text attained to an approximately settled shape. (Weber, 1882).

Pusalkar (1955) and Vaidya & Pusalkar (1962) trace the observations of the various scholars as follows. Ludwig in 1884 read into the Mahabharata the then popular Nature myth. He believed that the whole structure of the epic was based on the seasonal myth. He saw the epic as an allegorical poem on the struggle between the sun and the darkness of the night. In 1883 Soren Srrensen declared that the Ur Mahabharata consisting of seven to eight thousand slokas was the original epic kernel. He argued that this version was without any contradictions, repetitions or digressions and, therefore, was the composition of a ‘single inspired author’.

Adolf Holtzman in 1884 explained the contradictions in Mahabharata by the inversion theory. This theory sees the Kauravas as the original heroes of the epic. The epic underwent several revisions due to religious motives and in the 12th century it reached its final form in which the Pandavas are the heroes of the epic. Scholars like Lassen, Winternitz, Meyer, Von Schroder and Grisson favoured this theory. The same was criticised and rejected by Barth, Levi, Posahel, Jacobi, Oldenberg and Hopkins.

In his work The Great Epic of India Hopkins (1969) traced the origin and the development of the epic in four stages.

1. 400 BC: There is a collection of Bharata lays in which the Pandavas are yet unknown.
2. 400 - 200 BC: There springs up Mahabharata tales in which the Pandavas are the heroes, Krishna is a demi-god.
3. 300 BC - 100/200 AD: Krishna now becomes the all-powerful God. Interpolation of a didactic nature, new episodes added.
4. 200 - 400 AD: The introduction and the later books added.
Though Hopkins’ theories have found general acceptance, Pusalker and many other scholars are of the view that Hopkins’ theories, conclusions and statistics have to be revised and corrected (Pusalker, 1955).

Joseph Dahlmann in 1899 expressed the view that Mahabharata is the work of a single poet who incorporated into his work the pre-existing narration and didactic elements so as to instruct the masses in the dharmasastra. Fick, Barth and Levi were of the same opinion, that it is a unified work. But they differed in other points such as the date of the epic and the purpose of the epic.

Jacobi sees four different periods in the growth of the epic:

1. The development of the story
2. The origin of the epical poem
3. The fixing of the epical corpus by the sutas
4. Incorporation of the didactic parts.

Jacobi places the date of the epic as not later than 2nd or 3rd century BC.

According to Winternitz (1926) the Mahabharata assumed its present form by several additions. He lists the elements that make up the present form of the epic as:

1. Legendary matters from bardic repertoire, having but a casual connection, or having no connection with the epic heroes.
2. Myths and legends of Brahmanic origin and didactic sections pertaining to Brahmanic philosophy, ethics and law, stressing the superiority of the Brahmanas.
3. Cosmological, genealogical and geographical matter and local myths
4. Myths of Vishnu and later of Siva
5. Fables, parables, fairy tales and moral stories
6. Ascetic poetry
7. Prose pieces and Brahmanical legends and moral tales, entirely or partly in prose.

Pisain (1939) in his work The Rise of the Mahabharata states that in Mahabharata the author added to his original work the following material that already existed.
1. The episodes relating to the heroes of the Bharata saga
2. Edifying religious and moral teachings
3. The Brahmanical traditions.

Yardi (1886) in his *Mahabharata: Its Genesis and Growth* traces the origin of *Mahabharata* to a period before the Vedic *samhitas* came into existence. He stresses that the historic epic poem of the Bharata war was the earliest work to be found in the *suta* tradition. The *suta* tradition comprised of a collection of a large amount of popular, bardic, legendary and historical material which was in a fluid state. To the bardic historical epic poem was added the ‘religio-ethical elements of Krsnaism. Later on the Brahmanical *dhrama* and rites were added to it, transforming the ancient bardic lay into the present form'.

The *Mahabharata*, like the *Ramayana*, has two main recensions. These two recensions - the Northern and the Southern - have many different scripts. The Southern version of the *Mahabharata* is longer compared to the Northern version. The Northern version ‘is distinctively vague, unsystematic, sometimes even inconsistent. The Southern recension impresses us by its precision schematization and thoroughly practical outlook' (Sukthankar, 1944).

Numerous scholars have interpreted *Mahabharata* in different ways. It has been given allegorical interpretations and symbolic explanations. It was seen as expounding the Hindu law, or the systems of Hindu philosophy. *Mahabharata* is also seen as representing the nature myth and the solar myth. Above all *Mahabharata* is a narrative as stated in the epic itself. It is a narrative which grows out of the answers to the questions of Janmejaya about his forefathers and the discord that arose among those men of ‘unblemished deeds’.

It is said in *Mahabharata* that ‘What is said here is dealt with elsewhere. What is not said here cannot be found anywhere’. *Mahabharata* is looked upon as an *itihasa*, *akhyana*, *purana*, and *kavya*, also as *dharmasastra*, *arthastra*, *kamasstra*, *nitisastra* and *moksasastra*. 
2.4.3 *Puranas*

The *puranas*, which are placed along with the *itihasas*, are ‘old tales’ or ancient narratives. It is the traditional belief, that these tales, were also compiled by Vyasa who taught them to Lomaharsana, a *suta*, who in turn taught them to his six disciples.

Besides cosmogony, they deal with descriptions of the earth, the doctrine of the cosmic ages, the exploits of ancient gods, saints and heroes, accounts of the *avatharas* of Vishnu, the genealogies of the Solar and Lunar race of kings and enumerations of the thousand names of Vishnu and Siva. They also contain rules about the worship of the gods by means of prayers, fasting, votive offerings, festivals and pilgrimages.’(Sastri, 1978).

There are altogether eighteen *mahapuranas* (major *puranas*) and almost the same number of *upapuranas* (secondary *puranas*).

According to the definition in *Amarakosa*, a 6th century Sanskrit lexicon, the *puranas* are to deal with the topics of:

1. Creation or evolution of the universe from its natural cause.
2. Recreation of the world from its constituent elements in which it is merged at the close of each aeon.
4. Cosmic cycle, each of which is ruled over by Manu, the first father of mankind.
5. Accounts of royal dynasties.

(Hazra, 1962)

For this reason, the *puranas* are also described as *pancha lashana*, those having five characteristics.

Weber says the *puranas* have,
unquestionably preserved much of the matter of the older works; and accordingly it is not uncommon to meet with lengthy passages similarly worded, in several of them at the same time. Generally speaking as regards the tradition of primitive times, they closely follow the Mahabharata as their authority; but they likewise advert though uniformly in a prophetic tone as to the historic line of kings. Here however, they come into the most violent conflict not only with each other, but also with chronology in general, so that their historical value in this respect is extremely small (Weber, 1882).

2.5 Kavyas

2.5.1 Kavyas and Mahakavyas

As stated in the previous section, Sanskrit epic poetry falls into two main classes: (i) the itihasas and puranas, and (ii) the mahakavyas. Kavya is the work of a Kavi. Etymologically the word kavi may be said to indicate the one who describes. Rajasekhara (9th and 10th centuries, author of Kavyamimamsa) expresses this view (Tiwary, 1984). But not all the works of kavis are kavyas. According to Mammata ((12th century, author of Kavyaparakasa) the author of a kavya should transcend the general popular way of describing (Tiwary, 1984). Warder (1972) gives a broader definition stating that kavya means literature as a form of art and Peterson (2003) restricts this definition by imposing a condition that it should be in the medium of figurative language. Meenakshi (1999, p53) agrees with this and states ‘a kavya is a form of art and the beginning of kavya is in the lyric poetry written by a kavi’. According to Shipley (1970), the dominant feature of the kavyas was a 'conscious striving for flavour'. Kavya can be in prose or in verse form (Meenakshi, 1999). Some consider epic poetry, drama, lyric and gnomic poetry and fables and stories in prose as kavyas because 'they all have one central rasa, one dominant transformation of one particular sentiment’ (Vatsyayan, 1983, p22).

Kavyas are divided as sravya (audible) and drsya (seeable) (Tiwary, 1984). The aural (or those to be heard) are for reading and reciting and the complete message of the author can be understood from the language alone (Chandrasekharan & Sastri, 1951). The
seeable ones (or those to be seen) are for performing on the stage (plays or dramas) (Tiwary, 1984). They give a better impression to the viewers when performed on stage rather than when read or heard.

The kavyas to be heard (sravya) are further divided into padya (verse or metrical), gadya (prose or non-metrical) and champu (prose and verse mixed) (Meenakshi, 1999). According to Chandrasekharan & Sastri (1951) gadya, in Sanskrit, does not mean simple prose. It should embody musical cadences in the formation of sentences and should possess some rhythmic element in it. Bana Bhatta 's Kadambari is a good example of this kind.

The term mahakavya is made up of the words mahat (big) and kavya (Ramji, 1992). Therefore, any grand or long work in kavya may be called a mahakavya. But, mahat indicates quality as well and there are set rules more detailed and more complex than the simple meaning indicated by the term mahakavya. Hence, a kavya becomes a mahakavya not just by being big but also by having all or most of the elements suggested by the theorists. These elements are discussed in Section 2.

Peterson distinguishes itihasa-puranas (heroic and mythic narratives) and mahakavyas as follows: itihasa-puranas 'tell a story, usually in order to help the reader/listener to gain spiritual benefits... (Mahakavyas) may tell a story and may impart moral values in doing so, but their primary function is to adorn and beautify, and thus render auspicious, the persons and milieu that they celebrate' (Peterson, 2003, p10). The term mahakavya is often translated as court epic (Peterson, 2003) or ornate epic (Krishnamoorthy, 1985). In the western tradition where epics are classified as primary (or oral) and secondary (or literary or written), mahakavyas may be said to fall into the category of secondary epics. Since this chapter is devoted to epics, ordinary kavyas are not considered here. Only mahakavyas are taken up for discussion.

In the history of Sanskrit literature the kavya period (beginning from the 1st century AD) comes after the two earlier phases, namely the period of vedas (ca. 2000 – ca. 500
BC) and the period of *itihasas* (ca. 3rd century BC) (Shipley, 1970). The two *itihasas*, the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata* are also *kavyas* in the sense that they are works of poetry though they are more commonly referred to as *itihasas*. However, *Ramayana* is sometimes specifically called the *adikavya* (the first poem) as it is the oldest work in *kavya* and has many characteristics that are found in the later *mahakavyas*. Hence its author, Valmiki, is also called the *adikavi*.

Raghavan (1978) writing on *mahakavya* literature says, 'The ideology bequeathed to the classical poets by Vyasa and Valmiki was the projection through the *mahakavyas* of the personality and the heroic acts of one of exalted nature (*dhirodatta*), one who was ruler-sage (*rajarishi*) and an upkeeper of dhrama.

Valmiki hasn’t referred to his *Ramayana* as *mahakavya* but named it *kavya* with the epithet *mahat* (Ramji, 1992). The term *mahakavya* is first found in the colophons of the 1st century works of Ashvaghosa and in the 4th century works of Kalidasa. However, it is not clear whether these colophons are written by the authors or if they are later additions (Ramji, 1992).

A gap appears in the composition of *kavyas* between the period of *itihasas* and that of *kavyas*; this begins in the 1st century AD with the works of Asvaghosa. It seems that this gap appears not because no poetry was written during this period but because works authored during this time are lost. Some later anthologies state that Panini, the grammarian, who lived between 500 and 350 BC, composed a long poem some verses from which are extant (Chatterji, 2001). Patanjali, in his 2nd century AD work, refers to several old narratives and quotes from many of them but none of them is to be found in full form now (Chatterji, 2001). The earliest available ones are the two works of the Buddhist poet Asvaghosa who belongs to the 1st century AD.

Innovations and new experiments were tried in *mahakavya* form during the later period. Through *slesa* (double entendre) two different stories were told in the same set of verses. These poems were called *divisandhana* (pursuing the two). Later this extended to
telling up to seven different stories in the same set of verses. In another type called vilomakavyas one story can be found when it is read forward and another if read backward. In a new trend, Bhatti (6th-7th century AD) composed Ravanavadha, which, while telling the story, also illustrates Panini’s grammar and poetics. Several others followed this mode.

In the composition of the mahakavyas the concentration was more on the external form than on the content. ‘The main characteristic whereof, as a poetic piece, is that it attaches more importance to the form than the subject matter’ (Winternitz, 1926). Winternitz cites the essential peculiarities of the mahakavya style as:

1. Accumulation of similes and fascinations for long winding descriptions – especially certain stereotyped representations (e.g. of the seasons, sunrise, the moon lit for night etc).
2. Employing artificial internally rhyming and artistically constructed metres, the use of rare words and long compound words with more than one meanings, strange play of words, ...
3. Mahakavya is not only artificial but also learned. The real poet must have studied most of the different sciences. Needs must he master lexicons for finding out rarest possible words. ...He must be apt in the treatises on war-craft and politics... ...for introducing descriptions of war and political trickeries. ...He must be familiar with science of erotic (kamastra) to be able to describe love scenes and sentiments of loving couples. Above all he must make his own text book on prosody and poetics in order to introduce into his poem the most difficult metres and a rich variety of the figures of speech (alankaras).

About the mahakavyas of Asvaghosa, Krishnamoorthy states:

Judging from the complex artificiality of style and formal arrangement of theme in well-fashioned cantos in the Buddhist poet Asvaghosa (1st c. AD), we may conclude that the set rules for the genre of mahakavya had already been formulated by theorists by that time, though we actually get a glimpse into them in the earliest available rhetoric of Bhamaha (c.600 AD) ((Krishnamoorthy, 1985, p8).

However, Vatsyayan states that Asvaghosa and Kalidasa,
are not restricted by any prescribed format as their successors are, nor do they indulge in word-play for its own sake. Bharavi (5th-6th century AD), Magha (early 7th century AD) and Sri Harsa (12th century AD) show much concern with embellishment and ornamentation and frequently indulge in poetic jugglery. They also conform (to) a set pattern for the mahakavya. ....The effort to conform to this pattern results in a looseness of the structure: the different descriptions appear to be independent compositions assembled together. Kalidasa and Asvaghosha also provide examples of such descriptions, but in their case, they are fused into the structure and are an organic part of the narrative. Presumably, it was their work which provided the model for later poets who unfortunately followed it in a rigidly formalistic manner. As we move away from the two great early poets we perceive a gradual but continuous decay of the epic narrative form (Vatsyayan, 1983, p24).

It is more likely that when the grammarians and rhetoricians devise their rules they base them on their study of existing literatures. And if their work is recognized, later composers may follow the rules. Hence it appears that Vatsyayan’s argument is more credible than Krishnamoorthy’s and that the rules appeared after the compositions of Asvaghosa and Kalidasa. Peterson also agrees with this when she states, ‘three most celebrated Sanskrit court epics, the Kumarasambhava (The Origin of Kumara) and the Raghuvamsa (The Lineage of Raghu) of Kalidasa (4th-5th centuries), and Bharavi’s (6th century) Kiratarjuniya (Arjuna and the Hunter), predate the works on poetics’. (Peterson, 2003, p7)

Whatever, it is beneficial to be familiar with the rules before going into a discussion on the mahakavyas. In the coming section, information regarding the major Sanskrit works on the poetics of mahakavyas is given first, followed by the rules contained in them.

2.5.2 Epic Framework of Sanskrit Rhetoricians

The Sanskrit term alankara sastra refers to poetics or aesthetics (Chandrasekharan & Sastri, 1951) or figures of speech (Peterson, 2003). Starting from 6th century AD, several books have been written in Sanskrit on this subject. Important works in this regard have been reviewed by Chandrasekharan and Subrahmanya Sastri (1951). In the
following paragraphs information regarding some of the important works in *alankara sastras* is given. What they say about *mahakavyas* will be dealt with later.

After Bharata, author of *Natya Sastra*, Bhamaha is almost the first to write on poetics. He lived in the 7th century AD and his work is known as *Kavvalankara*. Udbhata has written a commentary on this work.

*Kavyadarsa* (Mirror of Poetics) by Dandin who lived in the 6th and 7th centuries is one of the most famous works on this subject. Dandin divided his book into three chapters. The first one deals with the attributes of the poetic form; the second which talks about the *alankaras* has two parts. These are about the *alankaras* based on sound and sense respectively. The third chapter describes the defects likely to be encountered by a poet and gives suggestions on how to avoid them. *Kavyadarsa* is a very readable work.

Rudrata of the 9th century AD had also written a book with the name *Kavyalankara*; this too is held in high regard. The 10th century work *Sringara Prakasa* by Bhoja speaks mainly of *rasas* and claims *sringara* as the most important sentiment. The work also gives a definition of *mahakavyas*. Hemachandra of the 11th and 12th centuries AD collected and summarized the information contained in previous important works. His work is known as *Kavyaanusasanam*.

Vidyanatha’s *Prataba Rudra Yasobhusabnam* is a work of the 13th century AD. Pratapa Rudra was the king of Orangal at that time and may have patronised the author. This is regarded as an authoritative work. The 14th century work *Sahitya Darpana* by Visvanatha bases its arguments on some of the earlier works and declares *rasa* as the lifeline of *kavyas*.

In addition to these works *Agnipurana* (one of the 18 *puranas*) and *Vishnudharmottara* (a sub *purana*) contain information regarding *mahakavyas* (Pandurangan, 1992). According to Pandurangan, Sushil Kumar De is of the opinion that parts describing
mahakavyas may have been included in Agnipurana as late as 9th century AD. He based his decision on the fact that most of the descriptions given in Agnipurana about mahakavyas simply reflect the views expressed by Bhamaha and Dandin.

Now the important aspects of a mahakavya as set down by these authors will be discussed. The name of the author responsible for a statement is given within brackets. The information given below is not taken from the original works but from the reviews (Keith, 1920; Krishnamoorthy, 1985; Pandurangan, 1992; Peterson, 2003; Ramji, 1992). The division of the topics into the following sections is done for this study only; it is not one done by the rhetoricians.

### Name

A mahakavya can be named after its author, hero or theme (Visvanatha).

### Parts

Mahakavyas are called as sargabandha because a mahakavya should be composed in sargas (cantos) (Bhamaha, Dandin). A canto should not be very long (Dandin); there should be more than eight but less than thirty cantos. The end of a canto should contain information about the subject matter of the next canto and the name of a canto should reflect its content (Visvanatha). There should be five or more cantos and they should not have an uneven style (Hemachandra).

### Prologue

A mahakavya should begin with a benediction, a salutation or an indication of the subject matter (Dandin, Visvanatha). It should have stanzas praising past poets and good readers (Hemachandra).

### Metre

It should be melodious (Bhamaha) and charming (Dandin). It is advisable to change the metre at the end of each canto (Dandin, Hemachandra, Visvanatha). A canto is
usually composed in one metre but some may have a variety of them (Visvanatha). Metres should change in keeping with rasas (Hemachandra).

Story

The mahakavya should narrate the story of a noble man (Bhamaha), should concentrate on the four purusharthas (objectives of man or, in general, pursuits of life) dharma (virtue), artha (wealth), kama (pleasure) and moksha (salvation) in general and the attainment of wealth in particular (Bhamaha, Dandin). Any one (Visvanatha), one or more (Hemachandra) of the four pursuits of life may form the backbone of the story line. The story should be taken from famous old narratives or from tales well known to the people (Dandin). The story of a mahakavya may be real or fully or partially imaginary (Rudrata) or may be based on supernatural events (Agnipurana). Mahakavya should condemn the wicked and praise the righteous (Hemachandra, Visvanatha).

Hero

The hero of a mahakavya should be a ruling prince (Rudrata), prosperous (Bhamaha), dignified (Bhamaha, Dandin) and of high birth (Dandin). He may be a god or from a noble ruling class (ksatriya) (Visvanatha). He should 'figure prominently throughout the body of the mahakavya' (Bhamaha). The hero should be 'introduced at the beginning along with the description of his family (Bhamaha), greatness of his forefathers, city (Rudrata), his philanthropy, his prowess and learning' (Bhamaha). He should be 'powerful, meritorious and eager to conquer his opponents' (Rudrata). He should express his attachment to the first three of the four pursuits of life, namely, virtue, wealth and pleasure (Rudrata). There may be many heroes (kings of a single family) (Visvanatha).

The anti-hero or villain should also be meritorious and belong to a respectable family (Rudrata). He chooses amoral paths to plot against the hero who is virtuous. Finally the anti-hero is destroyed by the hero (Vishnudharmottara). On no account should the less virtuous villain defeat the hero (Rudrata, Bhamaha).
Home Life

As part of the descriptions of home life, the *mahakavya* should include descriptions of marriage, sexual union, sulking, birth of child, garden sports, water sports and drinking festivities (Dandin). This part may also include the soldiers bidding farewell to their lovers before going to a war (Rudrata). The customs, manners and beliefs of the people of that period are recorded in this way (Subramanian, 1981).

Political Life

In this aspect, a *mahakavya* should include descriptions of the king consulting his ministers, sending a messenger, marching of the troops, battle and victory (Bhamaha, Dandin). The fame and victory of the hero should be given in detail (Bhamaha). This part should also include espionage, settling of the troops in camps and the return of the hero with his troops in triumph (Rudrata).

Nature

The description of city, seasons, mountain, ocean and rise of the sun and moon should be given in a *mahakavya* (Dandin). In addition, lakes, forests, islands, deserts are described as a part of the marching of the troops of the hero to the land of his enemy (Rudrata).

Communication of Emotions

*Mahakavya* should be replete with sentiments or aesthetic moods (*rasa*) and the emotions which underlie them (*bhava*) (Dandin). Different emotions (nine in number: Vishnudharmottra) should be described in appropriate forms (Bhamaha) to give pleasure to the readers (Dandin). 'Literary qualities should be achieved in conformity with *rasas* (emotions) in question. e.g. Love demands delicacy of style, heroism requires loftiness, fury goes well with harshness and pathos with softness' (Hemachandra). Although the *mahakavyas* may contain different emotions, there should be one principal emotion that permeates the whole work. This emotion is the lifeline of the *mahakavya*; all others should enhance it (*Agni Purana*). The principal emotion should be one of the three,
namely, love, heroism or tranquillity (Visvanatha).

Others

A mahakavya should be of interest to all readers (Hemachandra). The diction and ideas should be highly refined (Bhamaha). It should be ornamented with effective figures of speech (Bhamaha, Hemachandra). The treatment of the subject matter should not be brief (Dandin) nor should it be ultra-exhaustive (Bhamaha). ‘It should have effective transitions (sandhi), an allusion to the five stages of action recognized by the writers on drama, by which from its opening the movement advances after a halt to the central moment, pauses, and reaches the denouement’ (Dandin) (Cited by Keith, 1920, p92).

2.5.3 Important Authors and their Works

Asvaghosa and other Buddhist Poets

Asvaghosa, a well-known poet and philosopher, was contemporary of king Kanishka of the 1st century AD. He authored two mahakavyas, Buddhacharita which deals with the life of Buddha and Saundarananda telling the story of Buddha’s half-brother Nanda. In Sanskrit only 13 of the 28 cantos of Buddhacarita are extant. Fortunately, the full text is available in Chinese and Tibetan languages (Chatterji, 2001). In this mahakavya the story of Buddha from his birth to his ‘enlightment’ is given. Since it tells the story of Buddha, didactic material can be found throughout the work. Even in the story of Buddha who renounced worldly pleasures there are descriptions of love, politics and ‘war’. Love theme comes in the form of women of the palace trying to divert prince Siddhartha’s mind from seeking renunciation. The court priests seek to do the same using discourses on politics. There is ‘a spirited picture of the contest of Buddha against… … Mara’ (Keith, 1920, p59). However, it does not come anywhere near to a battle scene.

In Saundarananda where the hero, Nanda, leads an initial love life with his beautiful wife Sundari enough space is given for its description. In the first canto of Saundarananda the author gives an account of the foundation of Kapilavastu. Heroic
tales and legends related to this city are also narrated. The final part of this work is full of material that deals with moral and spiritual discipline. This is a work in 18 cantos. In the last section of *Saundaranantha*, the earlier of the two works, the poet states that he had deliberately chosen *kavya* style only to give the spiritual message in an attractive form (Keith, 1920, pp36-37).

Raghavan (2001, p213) describes Asvaghosa as: ‘In metrical variety and polish, in verbal effects, in striking similes which are sometimes given in series, in picturesque descriptions, and in language and grammar, he shows an all-round mastery of technique’. Chandrasekharan & Sastri (1951, p105) state of *Buddhacharita*: ‘Certain passages wherein renunciation is defined and described are indeed of compelling beauty, the like of which we cannot see anywhere else in Sanskrit literature’.

Buddhist authors used the *kavya* style with *karma* theory as the central theme with legends and tales of Buddha. *Kaalpnamanditika* or *Sutralankara* and *Avadaba-sataka* of Kumaralata and *Jatakamala* of Arya Sura (4th century AD) are some of them.

Kalidasa

It is generally believed that Kalidasa belongs to the 4th century AD although other views are also expressed. It is also thought that he followed some of the literary traditions set by Asvaghosa. However, it is the general view that Kalidasa is undoubtedly superior to Asvaghosa in the art of poetry and that he depicted a well-rounded philosophy of human behaviour. ‘Kalidasa show(s) rare genius for compactness in lines and for illumination in thoughts’ (Chandrasekharan & Sastri, 1951, p107). He is considered as a national poet and ‘the authentic voice of the culture in which his genius flowered’ (Chatterji, 2001, p214). Compared to Asvaghosa, Kalidasa’s ‘handling of his material shows a much more developed aesthetic sensibility and a high degree of sophistication’ (Vatsyayan, 1983, p24). Kalidasa is admired for his unique and captivating similes. Later writers of *kavyas* considered his works as models.
Among other works Kalidasa has written two mahakavyas, *Kumarasambhava* and *Raghuvamsa*. *Kumarasambhava* is the shorter of the two; it contains 8 cantos (though some commentators mention 7 and others 17) and *Raghuvamsa* has 19.

*Kumarasambhava* (The Birth of Kumara) tells in eight cantos the story of Parvati’s penance to marry Siva, their courtship and their union. The birth of their son Kumara (or Subramaniya, Kartikeya or Skanda), his growing up and the killing of the demon Taraka by Subramaniya described in the cantos 9 to 17 are believed to be a later addition by many scholars because of its inferior quality. It is also believed that the final part of the original work may have been lost because the story ends in the eighth canto with the union of Parvati and Siva without describing the birth of Kumara. The material is taken from an old version of *Vayu Purana*. 'Its message and meaning apart, *Kumarasambhava* is an illustration of the poet’s descriptive powers; he describes the beauty of Parvati, of the forest in the bloom and gaiety of spring and of the grandeur of the Himalayas' (Chatterji, 2001, p215). Chandrasekharan & Sastri (1951, p108) praise it: 'For music in lines and chiselled expression, one cannot think of another classical poem equal to it'. Keith(1920, p87) states that 'by reason of its rich variety, the brilliance of its fancy and the greater warmth of its feeling' *Kumarasambhava* appeals more to modern taste.

In 19 cantos *Raghuvamsa* (The Lineage of Raghu) tells the story of the solar dynasty from king Dilipa to king Agnivarna in which Raghu and Rama are also important members. The dynasty comes into prominence at the time of the reign of Dilipa, reaches its peak when Rama is the king and then declines and loses all its glory in the period of Agnivarna. Rama is the central figure in this *mahakavya* and it gives the largest space for him (6 cantos). At the beginning, it elaborates the high ideals considered important by this dynasty. The story shows how these kings followed one or more of the four pursuits of life (virtue, wealth, pleasure and salvation).

According to Keith 'Raghuvamsa may rightly be ranked as the finest Indian specimen of the *mahakavya* as defined by writers on poetics' (Keith, 1920, p92)
In this work there are descriptions of the country and the city, seasons, *svayamvara* (a young princess choosing her husband from a host of aspiring princes), marriage, birth, loss of a loved one, grief, war, victory, coronation and many other epic features.

### Bharavi

Bharavi was patronized by the Chalukya king Kubjavisnuvardhana of Vengi who ruled in the 7th century AD. Bharavi’s *mahakavya*, *Kiratarjuniya* (Arjuna and the Hunter), takes its theme from the Vanaparva of the *Mahabharata*. In 18 cantos it tells the story of the exile of the Pandavas, Arjuna’s penance, his encounter with Siva disguised as a hunter and his obtaining divine weapons from Siva. His epic has a grand and majestic style in keeping with the nature of the theme of the epic. In poetic skills Raghavan (2001, pp216-217) considers Bharavi second only to Kalidasa and praises the thought-content in his work. Bharavi is also praised for his originality and for the deep meaning inlaid in each stanza and the vivid descriptions. Peterson (2003) believes that *Kiratarjuniya* served Dandin as a model for the genre of *mahakavyas*.

Keith (1920, p114) is of the opinion that Bharavi ‘is guilty of errors of taste’ when he ventures into word play in Canto xv. Bharavi’s epic is totally opposed to that of Asvaghosa in the sense that he denounces asceticism for the worship of martial heroism.

This *mahakavya* has incidents of a spy reporting to Yudhishthira on the activities of Duryodana and of the counselling of the Pandavas. There are the description of mountains and seasons as Arjuna proceeds to the Himalayas, description of river, sunset, moonrise, bathing, drinking parties and love scenes as apsarases prepare to disrupt Arjuna’s penance and the confrontation between Arjuna and Siva disguised as a hunter.

### Magha

Magha of the 8th century AD modelled his *mahakavya*, *Sisupalavadha* (The Slaying of Sisupala) on the lines of *Kiratarjuniya*. He also took his theme from *Mahabharata* but has shown much originality in touching up the theme (Keith, 1920). Chandrasekharan & Sastri (1951, p113) state ‘The entire piece strikes one as planned upon the
Kiratarjunia(m) of Bharavi. Even the shape and type of particular metres employed by Bharavi have got their exact prototypes here. In many other respects also it resembles Bharavi's work. 'The poem is packed with learning and displays of skill in using difficult types of composition. This characteristic, already seen in Bharavi, gathers momentum in Magha, and, through several other works of this class, reaches its climax in Sriharsa's Naisadhacharita' (Chatterji, 2001, p217).

War council finds a place when Krishna consults Balarama and Uddhava about the request from Narada to kill the Cedi king Sisupala. As Krishna, with his army, proceeds to Indraprasta for Yudhisthira's rajasuya sacrifice, mountains, countries, camping, sunset, moonrise, bathing scene, drinking bout, sexual union are described. After Sisupala leaves the ceremony protesting the first rites given to Krishna, he sends his messenger; then the two armies march to the battle ground; the war scene is described in detail. Finally Sisupala is killed by Krishna. All these are in 20 cantos.

Sriharsa

Sriharsha composed Naisadhacharita or Naisadhiya in mahakavya style and some other works in the 12th century AD. Kings Vijayachandra and Jayachandra of Kanauj patronized him. Naisadhacharita is a work in 60 or more cantos but only 22 cantos are available now. The theme of this work was also taken from Mahabharata. In this mahakavya he tells the story of Nala and Damayanti 'but being the product of the massive mind of Sriharsa, it presents a veritable thesaurus of knowledge' (Chatterji, 2001, p217). Owing to the abundance of knowledge that Sriharsa has incorporated into his work, it is characterised as vidvadausadha (a tonic for the learned). He has also written a treatise on sastra and 'his knowledge of sastras has found scope in this poem' (Chandrasekharan & Sastri, 1951).

Some Other Composers and Their Works

In Ravanarjuniyam, Bhaumaka (7th century AD) tells the story of the defeat of Ravana by Kartaviryaarjuna. Sivasvamin is a poet of the 9th century AD who lived in Kashmir. He authored seven mahakavyas, several plays and songs and 1,100,000 hymns on Siva.
One of his *mahakavya*, *Kapphanabhuvudaya*, is on a Buddhist theme. Ratnakara (also of 9th century AD) composed *Haravijaya*, a *mahakavya* on a *saivite* theme in 50 cantos. Anandavardhana who proposed suggestion (*dhvani*) as the essence of poetry also wrote *Arjunacharita*. In his *Kadambari Katha Saram*, Abhinanda (9th century AD) from Kashmir put Bana’s *Kadambari* into *mahakavya* form. The *mahakavya*, *Haravilasa* by Rajasekhar is lost. In the 12th century Mankah from Kashmir composed a *mahakavya* of the title *Srikanthacharita*, glorifying Siva.

Some other works are, *Nalodaya* (the story of Nala), *Janakiharana* (on the abduction of Sita by Ravana) by the Ceylonese king-poet Kumaradasa (8th century AD), *Raghavapandaviya* (each verse applying equally to the stories of *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata* at the same time) by Dhananjaya. *Vikramankadeva-charita* (history of king Vikramaditya VI: 1076-1127 AD) by Bilhana, Kalhana (AD 1150)’s *Rajatarangini* (River of Kings) which is a chronicle of the kings of Kashmir (Garg, pxxv) and *Navasahasankacharita* of Padmagupta Parimala (c. 850) (Haskar, 1995) are examples of Historical *kavya* which tells the story of a king or line of kings. These works are ‘not a mere chronicle of the names of kings or political events, but a rich and vivid picture of the social and cultural life of the country (Raghavan, 1978).

As stated at the beginning of this section, under the general term *kavya*, Indian critics include certain kinds of prose works written in highly rhetorical language. Important ones in this category are Dandin’s *Dasakumara-charita* (The Adventures of the 10 Princes, 6th century AD), the *Vasavadatta* (on the love story of prince Kandarpaketu and princess Vasavadatta) by Subandhu (early 7th century) and *Kadambari* (on the romance of Chandrapida and Kadamari) and *Harsha-charita* (on the history of King Harsha), both of Bana, of about the same time, or slightly later.

Jaina writers also have composed several works in *mahakavya* style. Two of the important ones are the *Harivamsa* (the Jaina version of *Mahabharata*) and the *Adipurana* of Jinasena and his student Gunabhadra (9th century AD). Some of the minor ones are: *Varanga-charita* by Jata Simhanandin (before the middle of the 8th century),
Vardhamana-charita by Asaga (10th century AD), Yosadhara-charita (story of king Yasodhara) by Vadiraja and Manikyasuri (11th century AD), Harsa-charita and Dharmasramabhuyudaya (story of Dharmanatha, the 15th Tirthankara) of Harichandra (5th or 6th century AD), and Padmanandakavya (or Sri Jitindra-charita) of Amarachandra (13th century).

More details of these works and information on other works can be found elsewhere (Chatterji, 2001, pp216-233; Chandrasekharan & Sastri, 1951, pp99-150).

2.5.4 Pancha-Mahakavyas

The term *pancha-mahakavyas* is commonly found in books on the history of Sanskrit literature. Raghavan (2001) states that in Sanskrit literary tradition, standing together with Kalidasa's two longer poems are creations of three later poets, Bharavi, Magha and Sriharsa, their poems being the Kiratarjuniya, the Sisupalavadha, and the Naisadha-charita respectively. Together, these five poems attained special status and came to be referred to as the *panca-mahakavyas* (the great pentad). Chandrasekharan & Sastri (1951) do not agree to the inclusion of Naisadha-charita as one in the five great mahakavyas. They believe that Magha's work is included for reasons other than mere poetic qualities.

Garg (1987, pxxv) states that the five mahakavyas mentioned above and the Bhatti's Ravana-vadha (based on Ramayana) or popularly called Bhatti-kavya are considered as six recognized mahakavyas. Macdonell (2004, pp216-224) discusses Buddhacharita, Kumarasambhava, Raghuvamsa, Kiratarjuniya, Sisupalavadha and Naisadha-charita and states that 'the six artificial epics are recognized as mahakavyas'.

2.5.5 Important Features in Sanskrit Mahakavyas

Six major works in Sanskrit mahakavyas, namely, Buddhacharita, Kumarasambhava, Raghuvamsa, Kiratarjuniya, Sisupalavadha and Naisadha-charita are taken up for this discussion.
All these six *mahakavyas* take their names either from the hero or the theme and are composed in several cantos. The number and length of the cantos vary widely. Except *Buddhacharita* all others have taken their story from older works. The stories of *Kiratarjuniya, Sisupalavadha* and *Naisadha-charita* are taken from *Mahabharata*, a major part of *Raghuvamsa* is taken from *Ramayana* and that of *Kumarasambhava* from *Vayu Purana*. According to Keith (1920, p58) ‘the exact source which influenced Asvaghosa in his choice of incident is unknown...’. But it is based on the real story of the prince Siddhartha who lived a few centuries before Asvaghosa. The life of this prince who became Buddha was well known to the people.

The heroes of *Kiratarjuniya, Sisupalavadha* and *Naisadha-charita* are either kings or princes. The hero of *Buddhacharita* is a prince turned sage whereas *Raghuvamsa* has a lineage of kings taking up the role of hero. Most interestingly, the god himself is the hero in *Kumarasambhava*. The characters of the heroes also vary widely. In *Sisupalavadha* and *Raghuvamsa* there is war and victory to the hero. There is no war in *Buddhacharita* or in the available parts of *Kumarasambhava* and *Naisadha-charita*. In *Kiratarjuniya* there is only a one to one combat.

Nature descriptions, aspects of political life and description of home life take their proper place in these works and the poets compete with one another in their imageries.

### 2.6 Kappiyams

The Tamil literary term used to refer to an epic is *kappiyam* or *kaviyam*. These words have their origin from the Sanskrit word *kavya* (Pillai & Pandurangan, 1985). The phrase *poruddodarnilaicheyyul* (continuous long verse with a single theme) which refers to an epic (Vijayalakshmy, 1981) has become almost obsolete in modern Tamil usage. It is to be noted that there are no oral epics available in Tamil literature. There are only
secondary or literary epics that fit into the Sanskrit genre of *mahakavya*. The epic tradition in Tamil begins with the presently available work *Silapathikaram* written towards the end of the period popularly known as the *sangam* period (200 BC to 300 AD), and continued till the 19th century when the Christian epic *Iradchanyavathirikam* was written.

Though there are evidences that the two great Indian epics Mahabharata and Ramayana were available in Tamil before Silapathikaram, only a few stanzas of these older works are extant. In the 14th century, Villiputhoorar wrote what is now known as *Villi Paratham* which tells that story of Mahabharata in Tamil. In his work of 6000 verses only 4337 are available now. This is a condensed version of Mahabharata. The author has concentrated only on the main story and avoided unnecessary elaborations. It is ranked as one of the most important epic poems in Tamil (Subramanian, 1993). Kampan, in the 12th century, wrote *Iramavatharam*, based on the Ramayana. This work is discussed in Section 2.6.3.

*Thandiyalankaram* written during the first half of the 12th century (Vijayalakshmy, 1981) is the first major work in Tamil to discuss the epic genre in some detail. It has taken its material almost wholly from the Sanskrit work *Kavyadarsa* by Dandin and the rules set by him have already been discussed. One major difference between the Sanskrit original and the Tamil version is that the Tamil Thandiyalankaram requires that the hero of a major *kappiyam* to be an incomparable leader (Jaganathan, 1955). Most of the later works on Tamil grammar that discuss epic genre follow the pattern set by Thandiyalankaram. Some important additions to the epic structure are found in *Maranalankaram* of the 16th century. They are: *avaiadakkam* (the expression of modesty by the author) in the beginning of the epic and the depiction of river and clouds in the descriptive part of the epic (Jaganathan, 1955).

The epics in Tamil are divided into two categories: major and minor epics The major epics in the Tamil language are Silapathikaram, Manimekalai, Seevaka Sinthamani.
Valaiyapathy and Kundalakesi. The minor epics are Uthayanakumara Kaviyam, Nakakumara Kaviyam, Yasothara Kaviyam, Soolamani and Neelakesi. But this classification is often debated by Tamil scholars as they feel the selection of these epics as major epics and minor epics is questionable regarding the quality of the epics. Other major epics such as Perunkathai, Kambaramayanam, Periyapuranam, Seerapuranam, Thempavani, and Irachanya Yathrikam are not included in this classification. It is because these epics, except Perunkathai, belong to a period after the classification was made.

2.6.1 Silapathikaram, Manimekalai and Perunkathai

These three epics are grouped together because all three were written before the Tamil epic writers adopted Sanskrit mahakavya form. Another reason for this grouping is that all of them are composed in the akaval metre (blank verse). This metre was the most common verse form in the sangam period. The epics of the later periods mostly used the viruththam metre. Vijayalakshmy (1981, p93) commenting on these epics notes, ‘The literary characteristics which we find in all these three epics are undoubtedly the ones which grew out of the tradition of the sangam literature’.

Silapathikaram (the story of the anklet) is the oldest Tamil epic. It is believed to have been written in the 3rd century AD. The author of Silapathikaram is Ilanko, the prince of the Chera dynasty who became a Jain monk. The construction of the epic shows the gradual development of sangam poetry. The story of this epic is indigenous to the Tamils. The main character is Kanaki, a woman from the merchant class. The other important character in Silapathikaram is Madavi, a court danseuse. Though Kovalan deserts Kanaki for the love of Madavi, the latter is portrayed as a virtuous person. The last part of the epic deals with the deitification of Kanaki.

Although the epic dwells on Jain philosophy, the author, a man of catholic views, includes Hindu elements in his story and shows equal reverence to Buddha and Buddhism. The epic brings out three of the four purusharthas (pursuits of life) namely,
virtue, wealth and pleasure. The fourth one, salvation, has no place in this epic. The hero is portrayed as an ordinary person and the heroine as a woman of very high virtues. The story does not have a villain who continuously plots against the hero. It has such features as descriptions of nature, love, separation, exchange of letters and tragedy (the state of Madhavi when Kovalan leaves her and the state of Kannaki when Kovalan is murdered). Silappathikaram also includes folk songs in its text and gives us some knowledge of the music and dance of the ancient period. Supernatural elements, such as revival of the dead, intervention of the gods, stories of previous births and bodily ascension to heaven, abound in this epic. Vijayalakshmy (1981) notes that Sangam poetry rarely has supernatural elements. Silapathikaram, that deals with universal ethics, is viewed as one of the greatest epics in Tamil ‘on the grounds of superior poetical quality, a coherent, homogenous plot and...a dedicated consistent emphasis on literary rather than religious values’ (Subramanian, 1993, p68).

Manimekalai narrates the story of a young woman Manimekalai, the daughter of Kovalan and Madavi (characters in Silapathikaram), who becomes a Buddhist nun renouncing earthly pleasures. This story too is native to the Tamil land. The epic Manimekalai consists of 4826 stanzas in akaval metre. It is the only Buddhist epic in Tamil. The author is Seethalai Sathanar, a Buddhist monk himself, whose, ‘frank and avowed purpose in writing this epic was to spread the gospel of Buddhism’ (Subramanian, 1993, p83). Among the four pursuits of life, Manimekalai includes only virtue and salvation with a Buddhist bias. Two sections of this epic preach Buddhist theology and declare other religions as useless. As in Silapathikaram, the central character is a woman. These two epics were written approximately in the same period of time and are sometimes referred as ‘twin epics’. One commentator (Adiyarku Nallar) of Silapathikaram says that these two epics together make a single eipc. Jaganathan (1955) is of the opinion that Manimekalai does not qualify to be considered as a twin epic with Silapathikaram and that Silapathikaram on its own merits, is a separate major epic.

Perumkathai is an adaptation from Sanskrit. The original story Brihatkaha was written in Paisachi language and is not extant. Brihatkaha was translated into Sanskrit by the
Jain king Durvinita, around the 6th century AD. During the 7th or 8th century AD, Konguvel a Tamil Jain, wrote the epic Perumkathai based on Brihatkatha. The character names and place names were modified to suit the Tamil language. The epic is composed in akāval metre. Of the 150 sections of this epic only 100 are now available. Parts of the beginning and the end of the epic are lost. The hero of Perumkathai is a great archer and is well-versed in music and other arts. He is not an 'incomparable hero' as demanded by the later rhetoricians. Although Jain teachings are included in the epic they are included in a way not affecting the quality of the epic. Perumkathai is considered as one of the most important epics in Tamil literature. Vaiyapuripillai (1998, p99) observes, 'the author has great poetic powers and his command of language is far above that of any other poet known till then. The sweet diction, the liquidness of his style and the magnificent flow, which is sustained throughout place him in the front rank among Tamil poets'.

Vijayalakshmy (1981, p95), who has done a comprehensive study of the literary features of the three epics mentioned above, makes this insightful remark: 'We also find elder ladies predisposed towards religious and philosophical pursuits, serving as caretakers or foster-mothers of the heroines in all the three works. ... Often they are Brahmins by birth, who lead a wayward life to begin with and thereafter come into the fold of Buddhistic or Jain religions. The introduction of such characters may either reflect what was a genuine social happening or may have been a technique employed by the non-vedic authors to condemn the brahminical practice...'.

2.6.2 Seevaka Sinthamani and Soolamani

Seevaka Sinthamani is a Jain epic by Thiruthakkathevar of 9th century AD. There are many firsts ascribed to this epic which were followed by almost all the later poets. Seevaka Sinthamani is the first epic to be written in the viruththam metre. The viruththam metre is made up of four-lined stanzas of the same length.(i.e. same number of syllables), the line length varies from stanza to stanza providing flexibility to the expression of varied sentiments and descriptive episodes. Invocation to God,
avaiyadakam (the author's statement about himself and his work with a certain amount of modesty), description of the country and city at the outset, are traditions that were introduced by this epic (Subramanian, 1993). The story of Seevaka Sinthamani is taken from Sripuranam the translation of Gunamittirar's Sanskrit work Mahapurana. The epic is made up of 3000 stanzas. The hero of the epic is a prince by the name of Seevakan. His father is betrayed by his minister and Seevakan is brought up by his foster parents who are merchants. He grows up to be a master of several arts and marries eight women including the vidhyadhara princess. He kills the usurper and regains his father's kingdom. After a reign of 30 successful years in accordance with the highest Jain dharma, he renounces all worldly pleasures, does penance and attains salvation. The supernatural element in this epic is seen in the flying vehicle and the marriage of the hero with a celestial being. Apart from the defects of loose episodial structure, concentrated religious thought in the last canto and unrealistic characterisation (the characters are either all good or all bad), it is a work of great literary merit and high creativity says Subramanian (1993, p88) in his analysis of this epic.

Soolamani in another Jain epic written in the first half of the 10th century AD, by Tholamolithevar. The subject matter of this epic is also taken from Sripuranam, the translation of the Sanskrit Mahapurana. The hero of the epic is Thividdan, son of king Payapathy. Thividdan and his elder brother Vijayan resemble Krishna and Balarama of Bhagavata Purana. The epic relates how Thividdan kills a lion with his physical might, marries a vidhyadhara princess and conquers the enemies of his father. Payapathy lives a full life and lives to see his grandson triumph over the vidhyadharas. Like Seevakan, Payapathy also renounces worldly life, does penance, and attains salvation. For this reason some critics consider Payapathy as the hero of the epic.

Though the main aim of the poet is to advocate Jain teachings, he does it with restraint. Subramanian (1993) is of the opinion that the epic will be read not so much for its Jain philosophy as for its captivating poetry and for its colourful and vivid descriptions. Seevaka Sinthamani and Soolamani are very similar in thought, content and structure.
2.6.3 Kamparamayanam and Periyapuranam

Irnamavatharam is the name that Kamban gave his epic. But Kamparamayanam - the 'Ramayana of Kamban' - has become the common name for the Tamil version of the epic Ramayana. This epic contains 11,000 stanzas in virutham metre. Kamparamayanam is not a translation of Valmiki's Ramayana but an adaptation of it; Kamban has given many episodes as in Valmiki's work but he has extended some parts and added some of his own creativity. Kamban has taken the Tamil language to unprecedented heights by his verse, imagery, character portrayal and description of sentiments. For this reason Kamban is known as 'kavichchakaravarthi' (the emperor of poetry/poets).

It is believed that Kamban wrote his work in the 12th century AD, though some place him in the 9th century (Subramanian, 1993). Kamban was profoundly influenced by the bakti movement that spread throughout India and the poetry of alvars (vainava saints). He has taken and extended some of their imageries in his epic. He portrays Rama as the incarnation of Thirumal but he consciously avoids religious preaching.

If Kamban was influenced by the divine portrayal of Rama by the alvars, Sekkilar, the author of Periyapuranam was influenced by the life of nayanmars (saiva saints). Thiruthondarpuranam is the name given by Sekkilar to his epic - meaning the story of the venerable devotees of God. The name Periyapuranam by which the epic is popularly known, means great story. The phrase puranam is not used in the Sanskrit meaning – an ancient story. Actually, Periyapuranam narrates the life stories of the saiva saints who lived a few centuries before Sekkilar. The phrase puranam most probably was given to this epic to indicate the religious flavour of this epic. More than 4000 verses in the virutham metre make up this epic. It is the first saiva epic to appear in the galaxy of Buddhist, Jain and vainava epics in Tamil literature. It is also the first religious epic based on the stories of Tamil soil.
The epic of Sekkilar has given rise to a new genre in the Tamil epic tradition. His work does not narrate the story of a single hero but the stories of 63 saiva saints within the epic form (Pillai & Pandurangan, 1985). Sekkilar travelled to all the places related to the lives of these saints and collected information about them. One factor that facilitated his travel and information gathering was his position as a minister in the court of the Chola king. When ‘after considerable research he is unable to discover factual details, he makes no attempt to fill the blanks with hearsay material’ says Subramanian (1981, p204). This epic serves as a treasure trove to the Tamils as it gives detailed information about the life styles, customs, beliefs and traditions of people living in a wide range of the Tamil regions of that age. In a way, this work may be considered as a historical epic since Sekkilar has narrated the life stories of the saints using only the information he had collected and verified. An interesting point to note here is that the Jain Mahapurana, which preceded Periyapuranam also gives the life stories of 63 Jain saints.

Sekkilar chooses Suntharar, one of the foremost of the Tamil saiva saints, as the hero of his epic. He narrates how Suntharar was a personal attendant of Siva before he was born here on earth. The details of the Chola kingdom and the city of Thiruvarur, where Suntharar composed his Thiruthondarthokai, is also to be found in this epic. Except for the fact that it does not have a single hero, Periyapuranam has all the other requirements of an epic: description of the five regions of land, autumn season, love and war.

Jagannathan (1955) considers that although wealth and pleasure elements of the four pursuits of life are dealt with to some extent in this work, they are not part of the main theme of the book. He is also of the opinion that it does not have the diversiveness of an epic that sings the deeds of a single hero. For these reasons, he classifies it as a minor epic. When the overall theme of the epic is taken into consideration, Periyapuranam must be classified as a religious epic of saiva philosophy. Supernatural elements and mythology take a small place in this epic; religious flavour, humanism and devotion take up a major portion in the epic.
2.6.4 Seerapuramanam, Thempavani and Iradchanya Yathirikam

Epics on all Indian religions, Buddhism, Jainism, vainavam and saivam are found in Tamil. During the 17th, 18th and 19th centuries Islamic and Christian epics were also written in Tamil. Popularising their own religion as well as the poets' desire to exploit the epic genre has given rise to three such epics. Subramanian (1993, p217) states of these works as follows: 'For, even though their motif is wholly religious, their authors have designed them more or less on the line of (epics), not of (puranas), and they should be judged as epics in accordance with the principles of genre criticism'.

Seerapuramanam was written by Umarupulavar (Poet Umaru) at the request of the Islamic philanthropist Sithakathi. The Arabic word seerath means history and this is combined with the Sanskrit word purana to give the Tamil form seerapuramanam. The theme of this epic is the life of Prophet Mohammed. Umaru composed 5027 verses and died before the completion of the epic. Banu Ahmed Marickar completed it 30 years after the death of Umaru by adding 1829 verses to it. This part is now known as Sinnaseera, meaning small seera.

The Prologue by Umaru contains the usual elements such as the Invocation as well as the Expression of Modesty. In the section that describes the country and the city, the Arab land is described according to the best of Tamil tradition; the typical features of the Arabian landscape cannot be found in this epic. Love scenes are designed in the sangam tradition as dreams of Kathija, the wife of the Prophet. Other epic features such as the delineation of the major sentiments, description of the birth of the hero, his marriage, war, water sports, and the sunset are found in this epic. Supernatural elements and Hindu mythology can also be detected. One drawback of this work is the excessive use of Arabic and Persian words, which makes it difficult for a non-Muslim reader to appreciate the work. Though 'the poet's devotion to Islam and reverence to the Prophet runs like a golden thread through the epic' (Subramanian, 1993, p218), 'talking high of Islam, talking ill of other religions and purpose to propagate the religion are not seen in this work' (Jayaraman, 1981, p161).
Rev. Father Beschi was a Roman Catholic Italian priest who came to Tamil Nadu in 1707 as a missionary. He mastered Tamil language and literature and took a Tamil name, Veermamunivar, for himself. Among several other works that include a translation, grammatical books and the first Tamil dictionary, he also composed an important epic Thempavani (meaning a garland that never withers) (Jayaraman, 1981, p155). This epic, written in 1726, has altogether 3615 verses. It tells the story of Joseph, the foster father of Christ. Folk tales and episodes from the Old Testament are also included.

At the outset of the epic, the author describes the country (Palestine) and the city (Jerusalem) where the epic action takes place. In effect, he describes the Tamil land according to the five-fold classification of sangam literature. He also gives Tamil names to his characters that convey the meaning of the corresponding original names. In this way, Joseph becomes Valan in the epic. The names of places and mountains are also Tamilised.

The epic glorifies both married and ascetic life but the description of the love sentiment, a major ingredient in Tamil epics is missing here. It also contains descriptions of nature and involvement of supernatural elements as found in the epic tradition.

Krishnapillai was born in a vainava family in 1827 and was converted to Christianity at the age of 30. He adapted John Bunyan’s Pilgrim’s Progress to compose a notable Tamil epic by the name, Iradchanya Yathirikam, with Christ as the hero. In 3766 verses, it describes the pilgrimage of a Christian to the land of bliss. It has many of the elements of the Tamil epic genre but lacks the all important love sentiment. Subramanian is of the opinion that, Krishnapillai should be given quite a high place in the hierarchy of Tamil poets because of ‘his poetical evocative diction, his easy mastery over metres, his striking ability to present word portraits and his elevated style of expression (Subramanian, 1993, p222).
2.7 Western Epics and Indian Epics

The epic, be it western or Indian, stands for a form which has certain distinguished qualities. The most important of them all is the single action expressed in a grand manner so as to elevate the human mind. The main aim of the epics has been to create pleasure for the audience through thought and words.

Aristotle has Homer as the standard model for his discussion of the epic in his On the Art of Poetry. Aristotle gives five features of the epic. The first being that the construction of the epic should be based on a single action and that the epic, whether simple or complex, should be a story of character. The length of the epic is not restricted as that of the tragedy. This gives the poet the freedom to add many episodes; and the poet is able to describe a number of incidents that take place simultaneously, thereby adding to the grandeur of the epic. In conformity with Aristotle's view the poet has to stick to the iambic and trochaic meters as they are the meters of movement, the one representing that of life and action, the other that of dance. When referring to the language of the epic he says that the poet should resort to elevated diction only when there is no action, thought or character to be dealt with. If not the diction would undermine the action, the expression of thought and the creation of a character.

The five conditions that Longinus (1965) gives in his essay 'On the Sublime' furnishes a clear verification of the qualities of an epic. The first and foremost of them is grandeur of thought. Any great work should have the power to evoke great thoughts in the minds of the audience. It should also be a stimulus for human passions. The vigorous and spirited treatment of the passions in the epic should inspire emotions. Another feature of a sublime work, according to Longinus, is the use of the figures of speech. The employment of noble diction creates dignified expressions. This is achieved through the proper choice of words, the proper use of metaphors and other ornaments of diction. The structure of the whole work of art elevates it to an exalted level. This is brought about through majestic arrangement of words.
Sainte-Beuve (1963) in his essay ‘What is a Classic’ observes that unity of arrangement and execution as the main features of a classic. The author of a classic ‘enriches the human mind, increases its treasures, causes it to advance a step, discover moral truth and reveal external passion through his exploits’.

In the Indian tradition, the main purpose of a literary composition is to delight the human mind and abolish its ignorance. Kapoor (1998) traces the concepts of the various authors of Indian poetics on this matter starting with Bharata. What is given in the following paragraphs is taken from this reference.

According to Bharata the kavya ‘provides a guidance to ordinary people in the conduct of life (and also help them) have serious thoughts (sastriya artha). Bhamaha, in Kavyaalankara, says, ‘Composition of good poetry produces ability in dharma, artha, kama, moksha also in arts. It also confers pleasure and fame’. In his Kavyalankara Sutra Vamana states that, ‘Poetry, when excellent, accomplishes perceptible as well as imperceptible results, bringing about as it does pleasure and fame’.

According to Mammata, the author of Kavya Prakasa, ‘Kavya brings fame and riches, knowledge of the ways of the world and relief from evils, instant and perfect happiness (ananda), and counsel sweet as from the lips of a beloved consort…. The main aim of kavya, however, is the attainment of the pure unmixed pleasure that flows instantaneously on the experiencing of rasa, sublating the direct effect of the word and its meaning. As such poetry differs from the Vedas, in which the word, in the form of a master’s command, predominates; it differs also from the puranas, in which the predominant element is friendly counsel (not to be followed literally). Such (kavya) is the work of (kavis), clever in depicting things in a manner passing the comprehension of ordinary men; it offers to other poets and cultured men counsel most persuasively… As such (kavya) is by all means to be studied and cultivated’.

54
In his Vakrokti Jivita, Kunthaka says that the kavya aids man to procure purusharthas, for as sastra dissolves avidya (lack of knowledge), kavya destroys aviveka (lack of discrimination).

The comments made by Viswanatha may be taken as the last line. In his Sahitya Darpana he states, 'Through Vedas and sastras, the four ends attained without rasa and with lot of dukha (suffering). (This is) possible only for (the) one who has a mature mind. But as kavya is the product of anandasmuha (aggregate of pleasure) it helps even young immature minds to attain the four ends'.

References


55


Krishnamoorthy, K., 1985 ‘Sanskrit’ in: Nayak, H.M., (Ed.) Epic in Indian Literature, University of Mysore, Mysore.


Meenakshi, K., 1999. Literary Criticism in Tamil and Sanskrit, International Institute of Tamil Studies, Chennai


Muller, Max.F., 1859. A History of Ancient Sanskrit Literature, Bhuvaneshwari Education Services, Allahabad.


Warder, A.K., 1972. Indian Kavya Literature, Motilal Banasidass, Delhi

