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Are great natural objects in Sanskrit *mahākāvya* sublime? A preliminary study on the Loginian notion of the sublime and the practice of Sanskrit classical poets

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Abstract

This study seeks to compare the generic conventions of the Sanskrit ornate epic poem (*mahākāvya*) with the Longinian notion of the sublime, belonging to the literary-rhetorical tradition of the classical (Western) antiquity. It characterizes descriptions of mountains and oceans employed in the *mahākāvya* genre within the theoretical context of the "grand narrative" specified by Sanskrit literary theorists. The practice of Sanskrit poets characterized in this way is compared with the prerequisites of grand style, understood by Pseudo-Longinus as an actualization of the proto-aesthetic category of the sublime.

Keywords: *mahākāvya, sublime, grand style, Pseudo-Longinus*

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Mahākāvya (Skt. "great poem"), referred to as a "Sanskrit ornate epic poem" or a "Sanskrit court epic", is one of most precisely defined genres of Sanskrit classical poetry.[1] Its distinguishing features, which can be grasped from definitions provided by Sanskrit literary theorists and from exemplary works, have been elaborated in a number of studies.[2] With respect to the subject in question, this paper ought to open with a brief introduction to the *mahākāvya* genre that will broadly repeat some of already well-established findings with a view to locating them within a new context. Specifically, within the context of a literary-rhetorical discourse built upon a notion which is seemingly alien to Sanskrit intellectual tradition – the notion of the sublime as understood by a representative of the classical (Western) antiquity. Both the generic qualities of *mahākāvya* and the particular modes in which Sanskrit poets depict grand natural phenomena bear some resemblance to the classical Western idea of grand style preserved in the work of its most recognized exponent, Pseudo-Longinus. The preliminary comparative analysis of these domains may, firstly, facilitate clearer comprehension of the classical Sanskrit literary practice, and, secondly, provide the Western discourse on the sublime with a new perspective.

1 *Mahākāvya* genre

Bhāmaha (7th century CE), the author of the oldest preserved treatise on Sanskrit poetics (*Kāvyālaṃkāra*), defines *mahākāvya* with the following words:

> Mahākāvya is a big poem treating about big things, divided into

[1] In my use of the term *classical* applied to Sanskrit literature I follow Sigfried Lienhard: "I use in this book the term *classical poetry*, where *classical* does not refer to any definite period but to that poetry which corresponds most closely to the poetic canon irrespective of period. This term is particularly suitable for kāvya literature as it is impossible to state that any period was its golden age". S. Lienhard, *A History of Classical Poetry. Sanskrit–Pali–Prakrit*, p. 2.

[2] Among these studies, one should mention: I. V. Peterson *Design and Rhetoric in a Sanskrit Court Epic. The Kirātārjunīya of Bhāravi*; L. Renou, *Sur La Structure du kāvya*, pp. 1–113; D. Smith, *Ratnākara's Haravijaya, an Introduction to the Sanskrit Court Epic*; L. Sudyka, From Aśvaghoṣa to Bhaṭṭi: *The Development of the Mahākāvya Genre*, pp. 528–546; L. Sudyka, *Od Ramajany do dydaktyki, czyli zagadki poematu Bhattiego;* A. Trynkowska, *Definicje sanskryckiego poematu epickiego*, pp. 91–109; A. Trynkowska, *Struktura opisów w zabiciu Śiśupali Maghy;* S. Lienhard, *A History of Classical Poetry…*, pp. 159–225, A. K. Warder, *Indian Kāvya Literature*, vol. 1. The list is not exclusive.

> cantos, endowed with figures of speech, expressed in gallant words and resorting to goodness.[3] Its plot is organized into five narrative junctures of council, embassy, march / journey, battle and rise of a hero. It bestows prosperity and does not require lengthy explanations. Speaking about four aims of life, it teaches mainly about artha.[4] It grasps the nature of the world and all its tastes (rasa)[5], one by one.
> — Bhāmaha, *Kāvyālaṃkāra* 1.19–21.[6]

This part of Bhāmaha's brief definition presents *mahākāvya* as an ornate literary composition that consists of big things or is based on the idea of greatness, resorts to good things or to the idea of goodness, deals mainly with the pragmatic ends of human life and has the power to ensure the attainment of those ends. Here, Bhāmaha captures an important trait of the genre, which is its practical, didactic aspect. The plot of each *mahākāvya* is centred on the enterprise of a noble hero, who exemplifies positive values and serves as a model of proper conduct. Besides, the authors of *mahākāvya*s programmatically exhibit their knowledge of various traditional disciplines from grammar (*vyākaraṇa*) to political science (*nīti*), often with the aim of

[3] Sanskrit word "sat" translated here as "goodness" (abstract noun) has a variety of different meanings. Among them: "good" (adjective), "true" (adjective) "existing" (adjective), "a good man" (noun, n.), "that which really is" (noun, n.) or "beautiful" (adjective). The compound word "sadāśrayam", translated here as "resorting to goodness", in other translations of Bhāmaha's text is interpreted as "based on true events". Cf. A. Trynkowka, *Definicje sanskryckiego poematu epickiego*, p. 92 or "has beauty as its basis" Cf. L. Sudyka, *From Aśvaghoṣa to Bhaṭṭi…*, p. 528. I propose to translate "sat" as "goodness", because this word corresponds to a practical didacticism present in *mahākāvyas* and strongly emphasized in Bhāmaha's treatise. "Goodness" does not necessarily have to be interpreted here as a purely ethical quality. It may connote "merit" or "propriety" as well as "worth".

[4] The author refers to four aims of life recognized in Hinduism, also known as *puruṣārtha*. They consist of *dharma* (virtuous behaviour or moral responsibility), *artha* (worldly success), *kāma* (pleasure, desire or love) and *mokṣa* (salvation in the sense of spiritual liberation). G. Flood, *The Meaning and Context of the Puruṣārthas*, p. 11.

[5] Aesthetic flavours.

[6] *sargabandho mahākāvyaṃ mahatāṃ ca mahacca yat* |
agrāmyaśabdamarthyaṃ ca sālaṃkāraṃ sadāśrayam ||
mantradūtaprayāṇājināyakābhyudayaiśca yat |
pañcabhiḥ sandhibhiryuktaṃ nātivyākhyeyamṛddhimat ||
caturvargābhidhāne 'pi bhūyasārthopadeśakṛt |
yuktaṃ lokasvabhāvena rasaiśca sakalaiḥ pṛthak || KA. 1.19–21 ||

educating their audience.[7] In at least four of the preserved *mahākāvya*s, three of which belong to the group of six model works, a considerable amount of knowledge entwined in the narratives falls within the domain of public debate analogous to the classical Western rhetoric.[8]

Bhāmaha's list of narrative junctures or, in other words, events that are to be represented by the poet, partly explains what is considered as big or great within the courtly ethos that determined the contents of *mahākāvya* poems. A broader understanding of what Bhāmaha means by "big things" or "greatness" can be arrived at by turning to the definition of *mahākāvya* formulated by Daṇḍin (7th/8th century CE) in his treatise on Sanskrit poetics, *Kāvyādarśa*. He states there that *mahākāvya* is:

> Adorned (alaṃkṛtam) with descriptions of cities, oceans, mountains, seasons, the rising of the sun and moon, playing in pleasure parks and in water, drinking-parties and the delights of love-making, the separation of lovers, weddings, the birth of a son, councils of war, spies, military expeditions, battles, and the victory of the hero.[9]
> — Daṇḍin, K.Ād. 1. 16–17, Indira Viwsanathan Peterson (trans.)[10]

What Bhāmaha treats as narrative junctures, Daṇḍin enumerates among recommended objects of description. His list of themes not only explains the idea of "greatness" underlying *mahākāvya* but also indicates a very important characteristic of Sanskrit *kāvya* literature as such, which is an endeavour to collect and intensify *all the good things of life*.[11] In case of this *kāvya*

[7] In a sub-genre of *mahākāvya*, known as *śāstrakāvya*, the ornate epic form is ancillary to informative purposes.

[8] According to the study by Lidia Sudyka, this observation certainly applies to the following works: Bhāravi, *Kirātārjunīya* (6th cent. CE), Bhaṭṭi, *Bhaṭṭikāvya*, Māgha, *Śiśupālavadha* (8th century CE), Ratnākara *Haravijaya* (9th cent. CE). The first three of them are recognized by the Indian tradition as the model masterpieces. In *Haravijaya* and *Kirātārjunīya,* speeches amount to approximately one third of the entire poem. L. Sudyka, *From Aśvaghoṣa to Bhaṭṭi…*, p. 536.

[9] *nagarārṇavaśailartucandrārkodayavarṇanaiḥ* |
udyānasalilakrīḍāmadhupānaratotsavaiḥ ||
vipralambhair vivāhaiś ca kumārodayavarṇanaiḥ |
mantradūtaprayāṇājināyakābhyudayair api ||
alaṃkṛtam [*asaṃkṣiptaṃ rasabhāvanirantaram* |
sargair anativistīrṇaiḥ śravyavṛttaiḥ susaṃdhibhiḥ] || Daṇḍin, K.Ād. 1. 16–18 ||

[10] I. V. Peterson, *Design and Rhetoric in a Sanskrit Court Epic…,* p. 8.

[11] D. Smith, *Ratnākara's Haravijaya…*, p. 79.

genre, the good things should be the best, the highest, the deepest, most intense, most noble, most important etc. Ornate depictions of those objects and situations are bound together by a heroic plot centred on the exploits of a noble hero who strives to confront his worthy opponent.[12] The plot of most *mahākāvya* compositions written after the 5th century CE is greatly overshadowed by elaborate depictions of elements that are loosely related to actions of the poem's protagonist.[13] Poetically refined objects of the world, as imagined by a courtly community, to a greater extent share the role assigned to figures of speech (*alaṃkāra*) – the role of adorning the composition. In their function of adorning, ornate depictions tend to turn into autonomous essences of the worldly objects that form a collection of "the greatest things", which often appears to be much more evident than the plot that binds it. The majority of themes, or, in other words, objects of description enumerated by Daṇḍin appear also in other definitions of *mahākāvya* and are employed by poets writing in that genre.[14] Mountains and oceans, which will concern us here, perfectly encapsulate the way in which Sanskrit ornate epic strives to distil and accumulate all the valuable elements of the world.[15]

2 Grand natural objects in *Mahākāvya*

The theme of mountain range, prescribed by Daṇḍin and customarily employed in *mahākāvya*s, is realized in a canonical fashion. The image of this inherently astounding natural object is constructed by the use of a fixed set of elements, which can be traced back to Indian epics (*Rāmāyaṇa, Mahābhārata*) and the Theragātha collection composed by Buddhist monks.[16] Dif-

[12] In K.Ād, 1.15, Daṇḍin states that the hero should be both clever and lofty (caturodāttanāyakam). Both Daṇḍin (K.Ād. 21–22) and Bhāmaha (KA,22–23) consider in their definitions also the way of introducing the antagonist.

[13] Such is the case with *Kirātārjunīya* of Bhāravi, *Śiśupālavadha* composed by Māgha and many other ornate compositions written after the 5th century. The plot in earlier *mahākāvya*s written by Aśvaghoṣa (2nd century CE): *Saundarānanda, Buddhacarita* and by Kālidāsa (5th century CE): *Raghuvaṃśa, Kumārasambhava* is much more apparent and descriptions are much simpler.

[14] Other definitions mentioning themes enumerated by Daṇḍin appear in: Ruḍrata (9th century CE), *Kāvyālaṃkara*, Vidyānātha (13th/14th century CE), *Pratāparudrayaśobhūṣaṇa*, Viśvanātha (14th century C.E.), *Sāhityadarpaṇa*. A. Trynkowska, *Definicje sanskryckiego poematu epickiego*, pp. 100–106. They can be found also in anonymous compilations: *Viṣṇudharmottarapurāṇa* and *Agnipurāṇa*. Sudyka, *Od Ramajany do dydaktyki…*, pp. 40–44.

[15] D. Smith, *Construction and Deconstruction, Narrative and Anti-narrative: The Representation of Reality in the Hindu Court Epic*, p. 53; D. Smith, *Ratnākara's Haravijaya…*, p. 136.

[16] G. Boccali, *The Image of Mountains between Itihāsa and Kāvya*, pp. 57–71.

ferent authors of *mahākāvyas*[17] portray mountain ranges as reservoirs of numerous natural riches such as various species of plants, animals, streams, rivers, lakes, caves, winds, breezes, rainbows, clouds, lightning bolts, the glow of celestial bodies, and, most importantly, precious stones and minerals to which other elements are often likened. Divine (gods) and celestial *vidyādhara*s, *kiṃnara*s, *apsara*ses, *gandharva*s)[18] inhabitants complement this natural splendour with a touch of an otherworldly aura that prompts one to see the mountain in *mahākāvya* as a liminal space that connects the worldly reality at its best with some higher celestial domain. Nevertheless, supernatural and mythical elements do not dominate poetic depictions of the mountain. Instead, they appear to be incorporated into the collection of precious adorning objects. The way in which Sanskrit poets accumulate the aforementioned elements indicative of mountain's excessive richness can be inferred from the following stanzas[19]:

> [Himalaya] has no heaps of rocks without piles of gems, no caves without creepers, no river-damsels without sandbanks and lotuses, no trees without flowers.
> — Bhāravi, *Kirātārjunīya,* 5.10[20]

> [The Himalayas are] adorned by the multitude of large Kadamba[21] trees, filled with groves of Tamalas[22] whose garlands are entangled with one another. They are bearing rutting elephants and dripping with slightly cold snow-water.
> — Bhāravi, *Kirātārjunīya*, 5.9[23]

[17] The overview presented here is based on the study of the following works: Aśvaghoṣa, *Saundarānanda*, canto 10th, Kālidāsa, *Kumārasambhava*, canto 1st, Bhāravi, *Kirātārjunīya*, canto 5th, Māgha, *Śiśupālavadha*, 4th canto.

[18] *Vidyādhara*: a supernatural attendant of god Śiva possessed of magical power, *kiṃnara*: a mythical being with a human figure and the head of a horse counted among celestial musicians, *gandharv*a: a celestial guardian of *soma* (ambrosia), physician, singer, the one who knows the secrets of heaven, having a mystical power over women, *apsara*ses: a class of female divinities inhabiting the sky or waters, capable of changing their shapes, wives of *gandharva*s. Monier Monier-Williams, *Sanskrit-English Dictionary.*

[19] Stanzas without references to other translations are translated by myself.

[20] *rahitaratnacayān na śiloccayān apalatābhavanā na darībhuvaḥ |*
vipulināmburuhā na saridvadhūr akusumān dadhataṃ na mahīruhaḥ || Kir.5.10 ||

[21] Lat. *Anthocephalus chinensis* (a tree with orange-coloured fragrant blossoms).

[22] Lat. *Cinnamomum tamala* (a tree with dark bark and white flowers).

[23] *pṛthukadambakadambakarājitaṃ grathitamālatamālavanākulam |*
laghutuṣāratuṣārajalaścyutaṃ dhṛtasadānasadānanadantinam || Kir.5.9 ||

> On the white, far-stretching [Himalayan] peak, a closed tail of a peacock sleeping on the branch shone like a cat's gem bracelet on the long and muscular arm of Bala[24].
> — Aśvaghoṣa, *Saundarānanda,* 10.8[25]

> Over here water cascading from the mountain heights onto the foothills is like a mighty elephant's trunk decked out along its full length with glittering ornaments; permeated by the rays from many-colored jewels, it is fair as a rainbow arching across the sky.
> — Māgha, *Śiśupālavadha,* 4.49[26], P. Dundas (trans.)[27]

> Because of the illuminating fire produced by herbs[28], the sky full of planets and celestial chariots night after night reminds worshippers of Śiva of the burning of Tripura[29].
> — Bhāravi, *Kirātārjunīya*, 5.14.[30]

All elements of nature, distilled by a poetic fancy into precious ornaments, can be placed on a horizontal line that indicates excess through a multiplicity of valuables. This almost otherworldly opulence rests on the amount and quality of sensuous detail, culminating in the idea of an absolute "brightness" that pervades each description of mountain ranges. Concurrently, words expressing the incredible size of the mountain can be placed on a vertical line that indicates its geometrical magnitude, expressed not by an amalgamation of details, but by the pure force of the figurative characterization or even by a bare epithet:

> There is in the North
> the king of mountains,

[24] An elder brother of Kṛṣṇa or a personification of force.

[25] *bahvāyate tatra site hi śṛṅge saṃkṣiptabarhaḥ śayito mayūraḥ |*
bhuje balasyāyatapīnabāhorvaiḍūryakeyūra ivābabhāse || Saund. 10.8 ||

[26] *prāgbhārataḥ patadihedamupatyakāsu śṛṅgāritāyatamahebhakarābhamambhaḥ |*
saṃlakṣyate vividharatnakarānuviddhamūrdhvaprasāritasurādhipacāpacāru || Śiś. 4.49 ||

[27] *The Killing of Shishupala / Magha*, P. Dundas (ed., trans.), p. 133.

[28] Herbs glowing at night belong to the canonical set of elements employed by Sanskrit poets in their descriptions of mountain ranges.

[29] Three mythical cities of the *asura*s (antigods) built of gold, silver, and iron, situated in the sky, in the air and on earth. They were burnt by an incarnation of god Śiva.

[30] *grahavimānaganān abhito divaṃ jvalayatauṣadhijena kṛśānunā |*
muhur anusmarayantam anukṣapaṃ tripuradāham umāpatisevinaḥ || Kir.5.14 ||

divine in nature, Himālaya by name,
the abode of snow,
reaching down
to both eastern
and the western oceans
he stands
like a rod to measure the earth.
— Kālidāsa, *Kumārasambhava*, 1.01[31], David Smith (trans.)[32]

A bare glance at this king of mountains, tearing the sky into thousands of pieces with its snow-white summits, can quickly annihilate a multitude of human sins.
— Bhāravi, *Kirātārjunīya*, 5.17[33]

I think that even entire three worlds cannot equal this Father of Gaurī.[34] It is perpetually inhabited by Śiva, whose power is incomprehensible to men.
— Bhāravi, *Kirātārjunīya*, 5.21[35]

Raivataka seemed like another Vindhya mountain[36]; its high crags were shrouded with cloud canopies rising ever upward in all directions as if to block the path of the sun in the east.
— Māgha, *Śiśupālavadha,* 4.2,[37] P. Dundas (trans.)[38]

Who on earth is not amazed on seeing this mountain with its tall, illustrious peaks rising excessively high! As it spreads like a

[31] *asty uttarasyāṃ diśi devatātmā himālayo nāma nagādhirājaḥ |*
pūrvāparau toyanidhī vigāhya sthitaḥ pṛthivyā iva mānadaṇḍaḥ || Ks.1.1 ||

[32] *The Birth of Kumāra by Kālidāsa*, D. Smith (trans.), p. 25.

[33] *alam eṣa vilokitaḥ prajānāṃ sahasā saṃhatim aṃhasāṃ vihantum |*
ghanavartma sahasradheva kurvan himagaurair acalādhipaḥ śirobhiḥ || Kir.5.17 ||

[34] A title assigned to Himālaya mountains. According to myth, Himālaya gave birth to the goddess Pārvatī, the consort of god Śiva, also known as Gaurī.

[35] *akhilam idam amuṣya gaurīguros tribhuvanam api naiti manye tulām |*
adhivasati sadā yad enaṃ janair aviditavibhavo bhavānīpatiḥ || Kir.5.21 ||

[36] Māgha alludes here to the mythological story of the Vindhya mountains. According to this story, Vindhya, motivated by jealousy towards Meru mountain, which was favoured by the sun, grew to an incredible size blocking the path of the sun.

[37] *gurvīrajasraṃ drṣadaḥ samantāduparyuparyambumucāṃ vitānaiḥ |*
vindhyāyamānaṃ divasasya kartumārgaṃ puro roddhumivonnamadbhiḥ || Śiś. 4.0 ||

[38] *The Killing of Shishupala | Magha,* P. Dundas (ed., trans.), p. 115.

> cloth all over the horizon, the bright edge of the moon stumbles upon its summit.
> — Māgha, *Śiśupālavadha*, 4.19[39]

> It is thrown excessively high into the sky with its peaks dangling from hands of the full moon and supporting the stars. It is an adequate representation of a waterfall falling down all over mountain slopes.
> — Māgha, *Śiśupālavadha*, 4.25[40]

Despite its impressive excess, determined both by a collection of most precious natural phenomena and by the great spatial qualities, the image of the mountain in *mahākāvya* can hardly be considered overwhelming. The sense of awe inspired by its immense height and size is soothed by the quality of richness and sensuousness created by ornate descriptions. The absolute magnitude of the mountain, reaching up to space, is simultaneously intensified and tamed through absorption into sensuous and rich phenomena from the horizontal level of description, which appear to beautify it. This is why, in the quoted stanza 4.19 of his *Śiśupālavadha,* Māgha speaks about wonder (*vismayate*, 3 sg. ind. praes., from the verbal root vi- √smi: to wonder, be surprised or astonished at) at the sight of the mountain and not about awe, provoked by overwhelming, incomprehensible or even menacing qualities.

The theme of the ocean, also considered by Daṇḍin, is less popular with the authors of *mahākāvya* than the theme of the mountain. Nevertheless, instances of its appearance are numerous enough to ascertain that its poetic representations are no less canonical than those of the mountain. Similarly, they comprise elements already present in *pre-kāvya* compositions – specifically, in the epics and in the Pāli Buddhist canon.[41] The poetic image of the ocean is structured analogically to that of the mountain. Ocean's greatness

[39] *ācchāditāyatadigambaram uccakair gām ākramya ca sthitaṃ udagraviśālaśṛṅgam | mūrdhni skhalattuhinadīdhitikoṭim enam udvīkṣya ko na bhuvi vismayate nageśam ||* Śiś. 4.19 || The stanza contains a figure of speech known as *rūpaka* (metaphor) as well as *śleṣa* (paranomasia), within which the mountain and elements that qualify it are equalled with the god Śiva. I purposely omit this second meaning in my translation.

[40] *utkṣiptam ucchritasitāṃśukarāvalambair uttambhitoḍubhir atīvatarāṃ śirobhiḥ | śraddheyanirjharajalavyapadeśam asya viṣvak taṭeṣu patati sphuṭam antarikṣam ||* Śiś. 4.25 ||

[41] T. Pontillo, P. Rossi, *Sea-images in Pre-kāvya Literature: The Relationship between Mahābhārata and Pāli Buddhist Canon Occurrences*, pp. 167–214. G. Boccali, *The Sea in Ancient India's Literary Landscape: Pravarasena's Setubandha II*, 1–36, pp. 115–123.

is implied both by a collection of elements, imagined as its possessions or creations, and by its spatial qualities. Apart from elaborating on its roaring waves, foam, whirlpools and radiant glow, poets depict it as a reservoir of various natural objects, such as pearls, corals, gems, underwater mountains, shells, whales or fishes (*timi*), sea elephants, sea crocodiles and sea snakes.[42]

> Containing the earth-bearing mountains and serpents quite up to the burden of the world, they of unsurpassable power, who, bearing abundant brilliant gems, their bodies broad and weighty, concealed tortoises and crocodiles helpless with exhaustion.
> — Bhaṭṭi, *Bhaṭṭikāvya*, 10.54,[43] Oliver Fallon (trans.)[44]

Nevertheless, contrary to that of the mountain, the image of the ocean consists mainly of fantastic and mythical motifs,[45] which fuse natural elements with a dominant aura of fabulousness and mystery. Among them one may mention fantastic inhabitants of the ocean, such as serpent demons (*nāga*s), distinguished by their jewelled hoods, and unspecified sea monsters (*makara*s). Oceanic excess is to a greater extent otherworldly, expressed by references to myths, in which the ocean gives birth to various precious elements of the universe while being churned by gods and demons, serves as a hiding place for the mountains, whose wings were chopped off by Indra, or contains the underwater fire:

> This ocean furnishes sunrays with vapour and incites the growth of precious stones. It bears submarine fire and gives birth to the gladdening light [the moon].
> — Kālidāsa, *Raghuvaṃśa*, 13.4[46]

> The ocean really looked as if it was being churned once again by [Mandara] mountain.[47] It absorbed into its swift whirlpool a

[42] Bhaṭṭi (6th/7th cent. AD), *Bhaṭṭikāvya*, 10.51–62, Kālidāsa, *Raghuvaṃśa*, 13.4–15.

[43] *bhuvanabharasahānalaṅghyadhāmnaḥ pururuciratnabhṛto gurūrudehān | śramavidhuravilīnakūrmanakrān dadhataṃ udūḍhabhuvo girīnahīṃś ca* || Bhk.10.54 ||

[44] *Bhaṭṭi's Poem: The Death of Rāvaṇa by Bhaṭṭi*, O. Fallon (trans.), p. 241.

[45] G. Boccali, *The Sea in Ancient India's Literary Landscape…*, p. 117.

[46] *garbhaṃ dadhaty arkamarīcayo 'smād vivṛddhim atrāśnuvate vasūni | abindhanaṃ vahnim asau bibharti prahlādanaṃ jyotir ajany anena* || Ragh.13.4 ||

[47] According to the myth, this sacred mountain was used by gods and demons for churning the ocean in search for the nectar of immortality (*amṛta*).

> cloud that barely started to drink oceanic water.
> — Kālidāsa, *Raghuvaṃśa,* 13.14[48]

Unlike the mountain, whose excess coexists with tranquillity and sensuous pleasure, the ocean connotes force, energy and unrestrained passion. While describing its immense vastness and depth, poets abandon rational categories as well as mundane points of reference:

> The form of the ocean resembles that of god Viṣṇu. Materialising, it pervades ten sides of the world with its magnitude. It cannot be defined by quality or measure.
> — Kālidāsa, *Raghuvaṃśa,* 13.5[49]

Or they liken the ocean to an illusion, highlighting the "impossibility" of its excess:

> Then reaching the ocean they thought it an illusion: "Could this mass of water here really exist, pervading the entire underworld, filled with jewels and occluding the sky with its mountainous waves?"
> — Bhaṭṭi, *Bhaṭṭikāvya*, 10.47,[50] Oliver Fallon (trans.)[51]

Oceanic excess, infused with an aura of the unknown accompanied by force, indefinable magnitude and depth reaching down to the underworld may be partially perceived as an awe-provoking entity. Nonetheless, in the cited stanzas, the sense of awe gives precedence to the sense of marvel aroused by mythological details, which leads to amazement rather than perplexity. Additionally, disturbing or marvellous qualities of the ocean are highly aestheticized and, in consequence, contribute to the image of abundance similar to the one which pervades the discussed motif of the mountain.

[48] *pravṛttamātreṇa payāṃsi pātum āvartavegād bhramatā ghanena |*
ābhāti bhūyiṣṭham ayaṃ samudraḥ pramathyamāno giriṇeva bhūyaḥ || Ragh.13.14 ||

[49] *tāṃ tām avasthāṃ pratipadyamānaṃ sthitaṃ daśa vyāpya diśo mahimnā |*
viṣṇor ivāsyānavadhāraṇīyam īdṛktayā rūpam iyattayā vā || Ragh.13.5 ||

[50] *bhṛtanikhilarasātalaḥ saratnaḥ śikharisamormitirohitāntarīkṣaḥ |*
kuta iha paramārthato jalaugho jalanidhim īyurataḥ sametya māyām || Bhk.10.57 ||

[51] *Bhaṭṭi's Poem…,* O. Fallon (trans.), p. 241.

3 The Longinian Sublime

Both of the above-analysed *topoi* along with the quality of excess that underlies their realisation were acknowledged by the rhetoric and literary criticism of the classical (Western) antiquity. Demetrius states in his treatise on literary theory titled *On Style* (*De Elocutione*, 2nd cent. BC) that great heavenly or earthly subjects (75),[52] "[…] involving loftiness, hugeness, numerousness, passion (pathos), wonderment (thauma) and poetic heightening […]"[53] contribute to the grandeur of style. Similarly, Hermogenes (2nd cent. CE), assigns to grand style great natural themes, such as "movements of earth and sea".[54] In the classical theory of styles, preserved in works of Aristotle's pupil Theophrastus (4th cent. BC), Demetrius, Dionysius of Halicarnassus (1st cent. BC), Cicero (1st cent. BC), Quintilian (1st cent. CE) and Hermogenes the grand style is characterized by an aura of intensity and noble excess. It is full, copious, weighty, ornate, eloquent and capable of manipulating minds (Cicero)[55] or simple but vigorous, dignified, suggesting nature rather than art, able to stir emotions (Dionysius of Halicarnassus).[56] Quintilian describes it as "rising the dead to speak" or "launching into exaggeration even the Ocean itself".[57] Although, the system of three styles (plain, middle and grand) in its explicit form does not appear in works of Aristotle (4th cent. BC),[58] his *Poetics* contains remarks concerning grandeur in poetic composition. Some elements, recognized by his successors as constitutive of the grand style in oratory and applied also to literary compositions, can be traced in his account of epic poetry.[59]

An unidentified author, commonly referred to as Pseudo-Longinus or Longinus, composed an epistolary treatise, *On the Sublime* (*Peri Hypsos*, 1st century CE),[60] devoted exclusively to the grand style of composition, which he valued far above other two (plain and middle). This famous manual on the

[52] Demetrius, *On Style*, D. C. Innes (ed., trans.), based on W. Rhys Roberts, pp. 398–399.
[53] J. I. Porter, *The Sublime in Antiquity*, p. 250.
[54] Hermogenes, *On Types*, D. A. Russel, M. Winterbottom (ed., trans.), p. 567.
[55] Cicero, *Orator*, D. A. Russel, M. Winterbottom (ed., trans.), p. 244.
[56] Dionysius of Halicarnassus, *On Literary Composition*, Rhys Roberts (ed., trans.), pp. 211–233.
[57] Quintilian, *Institutio Oratoria*, D. A. Russel, M. Winterbottom (ed., trans.), p. 414.
[58] G. A. Kennedy, *Theophrastus and Stylistic Distinctions*, p. 95.
[59] J. I. Porter, *The Sublime in Antiquity*, pp. 289–302; G. A. Kennedy, *Theophrastus and Stylistic Distinctions*, p. 95.
[60] My reading of *Peri Hypsos* is based on: Longinus, *On the Sublime*, W. H. Fyfe (ed., trans.), D. Russell (rev.), Harvard University Press, Cambridge–London 1995.

techniques of attaining the grand style centres upon the proto-aesthetic category of grandeur (sublime),[61] presented as an excellence that can be traced in the elements of the literary-rhetorical style, in the natural world, and in the mind of an individual. The excellence is strongly connected with nobleness of character (PH.1, 7, 9) and with the nobleness that lies within the natural world (PH. 35). In its service to rhetorical or poetic ends, it is imposed on the hearer through an irresistible intensity of a dignified expression (PH.1), which fills him with joy and pride (PH.7). Longinus states that unlike other, weaker forms of persuasion, the sublime style "possesses" the audience or, in other words, "transports them out of themselves" through its ability to incite wonder:

> Invariably what inspires wonder, with its power of amazing us always prevails over what is merely convincing and pleasing (PH.1).[62]

Reluctant to define the idea of the sublime as such, Longinus shows where it can be found, how it works, and how to create it by the use of language.[63] He identifies five sources of sublimity: the power of grand conceptions, the inspiration of vehement emotion, the proper construction of figures (of thought and speech), the nobility of language, and the dignified, elevated word-arrangement (PH.8).[64] While the first two of those sources are a matter of an inborn talent that cannot be taught, the latter three can be acquired through practice. Among factors constitutive of the first source of sublimity (the power of grand conceptions) Longinus acknowledges visualisation (*phantasia*, *enargeia*), which he defines in the following words:

> For the term phantasia is applied in general to an idea which enters the mind from any source and engenders speech, but the word has now come to be used predominantly of passages where, inspired by strong emotion, you seem to see what you describe

[61] James Porter proves that: "*Hupsos*-words, as it turns out, are not privileged markers of sublimity in his treatise. In fact, Longinus has some seventy-odd ways to denominate the sublime – among these, terms for grandeur (*megethos, megethopoios, ogkos,* etc.) and a host of terms for supreme value and excess (*akros, diarma, huper-words*) […]. These are not merely synonyms of *hupsos*, because they are its equivalents". Porter, pp. 14–17.

[62] Longinus, *On the Sublime*, Fyfe (ed., trans.), Russell (rev.), p. 163.

[63] J. I. Porter, *The Sublime in Antiquity*, p. 61.

[64] Longinus, *On the Sublime*, Fyfe (ed., trans.), Russell (rev.), p. 181.

> and bring it vividly before the eyes of your audience. That phantasia means one thing in oratory and another in poetry you will yourself detect, and also that the object of the poetical form of it is to enthral, and that of prose form to present things vividly, though both indeed aim at the emotional and the excited. (PH.15)[65]

Further in this section, he adds that visualisations employed in poetry are naturally marked by exaggeration, which makes them fable-like and undermines their credibility. Contrary to rhetorical *phantasia*s, the poetic ones are not meant to convince the audience by a vividness operating within the limits of credibility, but to replace the need for credibility with pure astonishment.[66] They should be understood as literary devices capable of enchanting or possessing the audience by the force of an image that is properly selected and reproduced. In *Peri Hypsos*, image as such appears to represent the deepest, most forceful layer of a literary composition, the one that precedes the application of literary devices.

Effects produced by a visualisation resemble those created by nature, whose repertoire of grand objects lies at the heart of Longinus' account of the sublime:

> […] Nature has judged man a creature of no mean or ignoble quality, but as if she were inviting us to some great gathering, she has called us into life, into the whole universe there to be spectators of her games and eager competitors; and she therefore from the first breathed into our hearts an unconquerable passion for whatever is great and more divine than ourselves […]. So it is by some natural instinct that we admire, not the small streams, clear and useful as they are, but the Nile, the Danube, the Rhine, and above all the Ocean. (PH.35)[67]

Throughout his treatise, Longinus invokes natural objects such as great rivers, the Ocean, craters of Etna, the sky or heaven, celestial bodies or cavities of the Earth or hell, whose grandeur lies in their immense depths, heights, seizes or other qualities denoting an overwhelming excess that simultaneously uplifts the spirit and leaves senses at loss. Numerous stanzas by which

[65] Longinus, *On the Sublime*, Fyfe (ed., trans.), Russell (rev.), pp. 221–223.
[66] J. I. Porter, *The Sublime in Antiquity*, pp. 159–160.
[67] Longinus, *On the Sublime*, Fyfe (ed., trans.), Russell (rev.), pp. 275–277.

he illustrates the sublime in poetry visualize or at least mention those objects. Such is the case with exemplary stanzas taken from Homer's Iliad:

> Far as a man can see with his eyes in the shadowy distance,
> Keeping his watch on a hilltop, agaze o'er the wine-dark ocean,
> So far leap at a bound the heigh-neighing horses of heaven. (PH.9)[68]
> […]
>
> The good ship is lost in the shroud of the foam, and the breath of the tempest
> Terribly roars in the sails; and in their heart tremble sailors,
> By the breath of a hand swept out from under the jaws of destruction. (PH.10)[69]

In the above-quoted stanzas, grandeur lies in the representation of a natural magnitude endowed with an uncontrollable force that poses a threat to the observer. Literary devices are used here to intensify the natural sublimity and make it appear even more real than the actual experience. Unlike Sanskrit poets, Homer invokes a single mood, one of awe, which is neither soothed by ornateness nor overshadowed by the beauty of natural abundance or by the marvel of mythical abundance.

Contrary to modern biases shaped by Platonic and Romantic interpretations from the past, Longinian sublime, belonging to the classical literary-rhetorical tradition, is oriented as much, if not more, on the material world that encapsulates the idea of "impossibility" within its concrete grand features than on the otherworldly, divine reality that negates any form of representation. Longinus treats the natural, material excess as a model for sublime language, which for him is an extension of nature (PH.36) and should always resemble it. According to him, nature itself is not a disordered domain, but one that is regulated by the system of its purposeful innate laws (PH.2) and, as such, should be mimicked by sublime art.[70] This is why, paradoxically, a sublime composition, designed to create an aura of excess and emotional intensity, is subject to a series of stylistic constraints. While accepting exaggeration as a factor that contributes to the sublime in poetry, Longinus refers to Homer's *Odyssey* in order to show that the predominance

[68] Iliad 5.5770–2, Longinus, *On the Sublime*, Fyfe (ed., trans.), Russell (rev.), p. 187.
[69] Iliad 15.626–628, Ibidem, p. 203.
[70] Ibidem, p. 165.

of mythical, fabulous and incredible elements weakens the sublime, turning the grand narrative into "storytelling". For him the poetic sublime lies in the energy of a dynamic plot "dense with images drawn from real life", which is characteristic of Homer's earlier work – the *Iliad* (PH. 9).[71] He further criticizes the *Odyssey* for its "flatness" resulting from the predominance of descriptive passages that deprive the narrative of energy and poetic efficacy. Another fine example of a literary constraint is visible in Longinus' treatment of a hyperbole, which, as he says, should be used only in an adequate context so that its figurativeness remains unnoticed (PH.38).[72]

Literary-rhetorical devices inherited by Longinus from his predecessors and elaborated on in the larger part of his treatise, contain information about the Longinian and the classical sublime that would be difficult to infer from the elements of nature that he invokes. Such is the case with the technique illustrated in PH.10 with the poem by Sappho and with the latter of the Homeric stanzas presented above. He defines this technique as an ability to select the most intense qualities of the depicted phenomena and to place them densely one after another.[73] In the following chapter, he likens this technique to a rhetorical device known as amplification, which in his opinion contributes to the sublimity in public speeches but, contrary to common opinion, does not equal it (PH.11–12).[74] He specifies amplification in the following words:

> […] amplification always goes with quantity and a certain degree of redundance. To give a rough definition, amplification consists in accumulating all the aspects and topics inherent in the subject and thus strengthening the argument by dwelling upon it. (PH.12)[75]

In the light of his previous criticism of an over-elaborateness in Homer's *Odyssey*, amplification appears to be a possible source of the sublime in rhetoric, but a serious blemish in poetry. This may be the reason why Longinus fashioned a figure that is similar to it, but thanks to greater density and brevity, more suitable for poetry.

[71] Ibidem, p. 195.
[72] Ibidem, p. 283.
[73] Longinus states that this is the way in which different sources of the sublime should combine with one another.
[74] Ibidem, p. 206–207.
[75] Ibidem, p. 207.

4 Conclusion

Considering all that has been said about grand natural objects in *mahākāvya* genre and about the aspects of classical Western and Longinian sublime that correspond to them, it is time to answer the question posed by the title of this paper: are the great natural objects in Sanskrit *mahākāvya* sublime? Certainly, there is a theoretical correspondence between the characteristic features of the *mahākāvya* genre and the essentials of grand style propounded by classical Western rhetoricians and literary theorists. It is ornate, full of noble excess, able to stir emotions, highly persuasive and deals with great subjects. The difficulty lies in the fact that those definitions of grand style which accentuate the ornateness of an expression appear to be more adequate to *mahākāvya* than Longinus' sublime, but the information provided by these other classical Western sources is far too general to suffice for a comparative analysis. Other classical Western authors mentioned in this paper, being preoccupied mainly with the art of rhetoric, do not give as many specifics concerning grandeur as Longinus does, and do not elaborate sufficiently on themes and imagery that concern us here.[76] Consequently, the Longinian sublime is bound to serve as the main point of reference.

Both in Longinian sublime composition and in Sanskrit *mahākāvya*, grand natural objects function within a narrative that unites poetic purposes with the pragmatic ones. Such a narrative often alludes to the idea of nobleness and its pragmatic ends are identified with some kind of good, which is partly understood as an ethical value. Pragmatic ends are accomplished through aesthetic ones, and both of them rely on persuasion enabled by a series of literary devices. The choice of images, which can be considered as one among most important of these devices, suggests that both Longinus and Sanskrit authors aim at themes that exemplify the greatest as well as most intense elements of reality, or, in other words, the extremes of reality. Furthermore, in *mahākāvya*, the excess implied by images of great natural objects, recognized by Longinus as the model of sublimity, unquestionably incites wonder, recognized by Longinus as the effect of sublimity. As far as poetic means of re-creating that natural excess are concerned, there is a striking analogy between the literary device discussed by Longinus, which he likens to amplification, and the way in which Sanskrit poets condense various ele-

[76] All of them, except for Dionysius and Demetrius, apply the grand style only to oratory and not to literary compositions.

ments within a single stanza. As if advised by the author of *Peri Hypsos*, they pick up the most intense, diverse qualities or objects and densely combine them within the description.

Nonetheless, the arguments presented above do not fully suffice to identify grand natural objects in *mahākāvya* as sublime in the Longinian sense. The first major argument against identifying them as such lies in a fact previously stated in this paper – *Mahākāvya* poets highlight the natural grandeur of mountains and oceans, but only in order to tame it by incorporating into the collection of most precious and astounding things in the world. Within that collection, grand natural objects are turned into most unnatural, highly refined, ornate entities. This clearly contrasts with Longinus' notion of the sublime, according to which the sublime poetry should be most nature-like. In his view, any literary refinement of grandeur should be unnoticeable, give the impression of being derived from nature itself. Giving clear preference to the strikingness of a single expression and to the vivacity of a dynamic plot, Longinus would certainly criticise Sanskrit poets for over-elaborateness, over-refinement, excessive descriptiveness and lack of motion.

In *mahākāvya*, the grandeur of the mountain implied by its spatial qualities is greatly overshadowed by an aura of beauty, richness, and sensuousness and may be even considered a mere enhancement to this aura. Although such an amount of beauty and richness evokes wonder, it is clearly not the wonder meant by Longinus, because it lacks the element of awe present in Homeric stanzas cited by him. Despite its partly overwhelming aura of mystery, indefiniteness, and force that certainly provokes wonder, the image of the ocean would be disqualified as sublime in the eyes of Longinus due to its mythical constituents and its fabulousness. The abundance or multiplicity, which underlies both of those themes, creates a sense of grandeur. Nevertheless, it is a kind of courtly, highly civilized and domesticated grandeur that strays far from the Longinian natural ideal. While in both themes it connotes excessive wealth, in the case of the mountain theme, this wealth is sensuous and in the case of the ocean theme, it is marvellous. To sum up briefly: in the Sanskrit ornate epic, inherently awe-inspiring qualities of grand natural objects are domesticated by being turned into indications of wealth and, in consequence, do not "transport the audience out of themselves", as Longinian sublime objects would do, but rather heighten their sense of pleasure. These preliminary findings need to be complemented with further studies that will investigate literary vehicles of excess and the concept of grand style from the point of view of Sanskrit literary theory.

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