

Introduction

Lawrence McCrea · Yigal Bronner · Whitney Cox

Published online: 7 September 2010
© Springer Science+Business Media B.V. 2010

Bilhaṇa was a major Sanskrit poet who hailed from Kashmir and was active in the last quarter of the eleventh century. In the course of a literary career that took him from his northern homeland to the far south of the Indian Subcontinent, Bilhaṇa produced works in the major genres of drama and court epic and established a literary reputation that lived on for centuries among poets, critics, anthologists, and common readers throughout South Asia. Yet Bilhaṇa's corpus, especially his masterpiece the *Vikramāṅkadevacarita* (Deeds of King Vikramāṅka), when it was read at all and not merely mined for historical data, has, as these papers all show in different ways, suffered from persistent misreading by modern scholars. Even when his skill as a poet was praised, Bilhaṇa was often attacked as a simple eulogist, serving the ideological agenda of his chief patron Vikramāditya VI Cālukya rather than that of the modern historian. No attempt has been made to explore the overall poetic and political vision of this author, let alone to examine his unusual posthumous popularity.

Against this background, we present here not one but three in-depth analyses of Bilhaṇa's magnum opus, a rare event in the study of any Sanskrit *mahākāvya*. The three essays collectively make the argument that in his *Vikramāṅkadevacarita*,

L. McCrea (✉)
Department of Asian Studies, Cornell University,
Ithaca, NY, USA
e-mail: ljm223@cornell.edu

Y. Bronner
Department of South Asian Languages and Civilizations,
University of Chicago, Chicago, IL, USA
e-mail: ybronner@uchicago.edu

W. Cox
Lecturer in Sanskrit School of Oriental and African Studies,
University of London, London, UK
e-mail: wc3@soas.ac.uk

Bilhaṇa is paradoxically both representative of a variety of innovative trends in Sanskrit literary culture of his period, and at the same time speaks in a voice that is uniquely personal, idiosyncratic, and at times even iconoclastic. As McCrea's essay shows, while taking cues from predecessors such as Padmagupta, Bilhaṇa heralds a new and popular trend of Sanskrit *mahākāvya*s that are devoted to the careers of political figures. These are works that are accessible both in terms of their clear narrative style and in their non-mythical and this-worldly subject matter. In this, these later poems follow the example set by the *Vikramāṅkadevacarita*.

And yet, the turn to the here-and-now also allows Bilhaṇa boldly to focus on his own location and predicament. His views on poets, kings, and critics and his personal story as an itinerant poet are given a prominent place in the work in the form of a metapoetic prologue and an autobiographical epilogue. The latter, an independent poem within a poem, is unprecedented in its tone and size; in fact, Bilhaṇa consciously distances himself here from the most conspicuous precedent—Bāṇa's account of his youth in the *Harṣacarita*—as Bronner's essay demonstrates. And as all three essays show, Bilhaṇa uses his personal statements to distinguish himself within his cultural and political surroundings and establish what Bronner calls a "poetics of ambivalence and alienation."

The tension between Bilhaṇa's representative and idiosyncratic tendencies can also be seen as part of his unique blend of Sanskrit cosmopolitanism and Kashmiri patriotism. Through his own account of himself as a literateur whose scholarly and poetic skills are in high demand throughout medieval India, Bilhaṇa is the very embodiment of Sanskrit cosmopolitan culture at its highest, just prior to what Sheldon Pollock called India's "vernacular revolution." But in Bilhaṇa's mind, this mighty cosmopolitanism is entirely encapsulated in the tiny vale of Kashmir in the far north, while the rest of the Sanskrit world is a cultural wasteland, populated by dull patrons and petty critics. Bilhaṇa also embodies Sanskrit literary culture in the sense that he demonstrates (and boasts) full command of its models, poetic as well as scholarly. But as Cox's essay shows, his use of the models current in Sanskrit political theory (*Arthaśāstra*) and poetic theory (*Alaṃkāraśāstra*), especially in its Kashmiri variety, is playful if not subversive.

All three papers ultimately conclude that it is in dealing with his political subject matter that Bilhaṇa's ambivalence is most manifest and his relationship with the prevalent poetic models most complex. The basic paragon of kingly power in Sanskrit literature is Rāma, just as the *Rāmāyaṇa*, Sanskrit's "First Poem" (*ādikāvya*), provides the prototypical model for imagining the political in South Asia. Bilhaṇa regularly invokes Vālmīki and his characters when he comes to narrate the story of a Cālukya Rāma, King Vikramāṅka, but only to repeatedly disrupt this eulogistic equation of the historical and the mythical. There are many aspects to this dark, distortive tendency in his poetry, perhaps the most distinctive element of Bilhaṇa's work that we seek to resuscitate. McCrea's essay explores Bilhaṇa's surprising penchant for drawing the demonic Rāvaṇa, Rāma's enemy and antithesis, into his portrayal of Vikramāditya and other kings, and his repeated representation of Śrī, the very embodiment of royal power, as a blood-thirsty demoness. Bronner's essay, on the other hand, emphasizes the boldness involved in casting the patron-hero, whose major political battles were fought against his own

brothers, in the role of the brother-loving Rāma, and how this mythical frame that the poet skillfully embellishes and thickens is then allowed to collapse in audible silence at every main junctures of the plot. Bilhaṇa's antagonistic approach to kingship is so conspicuous that Cox in his essay wonders how the poet managed "to get away with it." (Indeed, later accounts of Bilhaṇa's life that Bronner discusses assume that his poetry repeatedly got him into trouble.) Cox's answer is rooted in Bilhaṇa's ingenious use of another important aspect of the Rāma template, namely the displacement of political discourse by that of male friendship, and the elevation of male intimacy modeled after Rāma's bond with Lakṣmaṇa, Hanūman and Vibhīṣaṇa above and beyond the king's erotic relationship with any Sītā. As Cox shows, it is this page in the Rāma notebook that Bilhaṇa always keeps in sight, to the point of making friendship a serious contender to the work's main *rasa*.

The three essays below do not even try to exhaust the richness and beauty of Bilhaṇa's *Vikramāṅkadevacarita*, to say nothing of his other main works, the play *Karṇasundarī*, and the *Caurapañcāśikā* ascribed to him (though references to the latter are made in passing). Our hope, rather, is to highlight some of the political-aesthetic components that, we believe, are central to this unusual work. But if our analysis proves useful to the study of other poets and their biographies, it would stand as a testimony to the paradox embodied by this crucial and understudied poet.