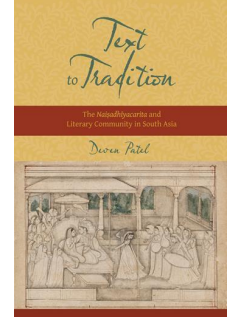


Text to Tradition: The Naiṣadhiyacarita and Literary Community in South Asia, by Deven M. Patel

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In this comprehensive examination of a seminal work of classical Sanskrit poetry (*kāvya*), Deven Patel emphasizes that any text is rich with hermeneutic possibilities, never existing as a fixed, static entity in the minds of its readers. So why then, he inquires, do studies of historical Sanskrit literature routinely strive to read them as such? Criticizing earlier scholarship as myopic due to a narrow and limited consideration of the text as a singular object of focus, Patel rightly argues for an expanded analysis that investigates how a given work has been variously received by literary communities across time and locales. He charges Sanskrit literary studies with a misguided conflation of the Ricoeurian worlds of text and reader, such that “even today, it is virtually impossible to think of individual works as having a complicated history mediated by various approaches to explain and interpret a text over time.” In the seven relatively concise chapters of his monograph, Patel provides an admirably novel and compelling example of how we as modern readers might expand our appreciation of historical works by moving beyond the text to consider instead the broader textual *tradition*. Including scholarly addenda that build around the source text—such as commentaries, encomia, pseudepigrapha, and narrative histories—he allows for a shift in focus from the text to the reading community, and so enriches our modern interpretations of both the oeuvre and its evolving historical evaluations. His precise, rigorous, and informed methodology, which should serve as a model for self-aware literary analyses, admirably animates both text and reader, emphasizing that the two remain mutually constitutive within a defining interpretive community that ceaselessly mediates textual readings.

The nucleus of Patel’s study is the *Naiṣadhiyacarita*, a twelfth-century Sanskrit poem in 2,760 verses composed by the renowned Śrīharṣa. Recognized as one of the canonical five “great poems” of classical Sanskrit literature, it quickly attracted a rich and extensive commentarial tradition,

rendering it especially well suited to the proposed methodology of investigating reading communities. Though ultimately Patel aims to extend beyond the work itself, he devotes the first chapter to introducing this foundational composition and the revolutionary genius of Śrīharṣa; consequently, his insightful and engaging analyses underscore the continued importance of the source text in his approach. His systematic interpretations of both the *Naiṣadhīya* as well as Śrīharṣa's philosophically oriented companion piece, the *Khaṇḍanakhaṇḍakhādyā*, are some of the most stimulating components of the monograph. Offering precise analyses of word choice, dual meaning, versification, and metaphor, Patel showcases his informed, sensitive, and ardent approach to Sanskrit poetry. For instance, his description of the “vigorous tone” of a verse in the *Khaṇḍanakhaṇḍakhādyā* as consonant with its philosophical message—or, as he puts it, “pitch-perfect notes of fusion between form and content, sound and feeling”—is inspired, as is his consideration of the *Naiṣadhīya*'s wordplay as exuberant on the surface yet emotionally turbulent underneath. In these passages, Patel unambiguously reveals his great respect for Śrīharṣa as wordsmith, and maintains a lively enthusiasm for displaying the ways in which the composer pushed the boundaries of poetic standards. However, in striving to authenticate Śrīharṣa's brilliance—which he unquestionably achieves—his selection of excerpts at times seems somewhat disjointed; further contextualization of fragmented snippets and an increased thematic drive could have provided increased integration of passages, particularly for those readers unfamiliar with Sanskrit literature or poetic analysis.

Following this initial exploration of the verbal artistry of Śrīharṣa's *Naiṣadhīya*, the next four chapters offer comprehensive engagement with the text's expansive commentarial addenda. With the stated agenda of situating commentaries in time and space as well as identifying relationships among them, Patel rightly recognizes each individual commentary as an autonomous work, itself located within an historical context and exhibiting its own hermeneutic strategies. The genre of commentary is frequently underappreciated, viewed merely as a crutch for understanding the primary text; however, valuing commentary and foregrounding its capacity for evolutionary shifts in trajectory yield fascinating results. Patel identifies three general phases of the *Naiṣadhīya*'s commentarial development: (1) early encounters that seek to understand the poem and establish its legitimacy, (2) a second phase that displays the *Naiṣadhīya* as a locus of intense scholarly debate, and (3) a final period of overinterpretation in which creative evaluations uncover polyvalent

readings and meanings. In elaborating each of these stages through meticulous exploration of a wide array of significant commentaries, Patel shows “how the types of commentaries that emerged in successive periods formed shifting paradigms of social and aesthetic practices of reading, teaching, and learning in Sanskrit literary culture.” One of the most fascinating of Patel’s findings is a shift from a weak pedagogy, such as that of early influential commentators Vidyādhara and Cāṇḍupaṇḍita, to more rigid interpretative approaches in the middle period, exemplified by the commentary of the renowned Mallinātha. Patel deftly maneuvers through a series of well-selected passages to demonstrate that the question-answer-explanation style of early commentaries, which were informed by a history of oral instruction, allows the text to unfold gradually before the reader in a manner that prompts exploration of open-ended interpretive possibilities. The argument that this exegetical trend suggests an early period of legitimization, in which commentators sought to understand the text and appreciate its poetic value, seems sound.

By the middle phase, however, the importance of the *Naiṣadhīya* was well established in literary circles, resulting in more boastful commentaries that sought to control the text by establishing authoritative readings and interpretations that could earn the commentator scholarly titles in the courts of the day. Another commentarial shift in the sixteenth century, however, abandons this tendency towards interpretative competition and favors instead “an articulation of the poem’s semantic polyvalence.” Patel offers lengthy commentarial passages that compellingly indicate the inclination to overinterpret and allegorize during this phase; rather than debating acceptable standards of Sanskrit poetics, later commentators engage in creative exegesis that strives to uncover hidden readings, dual meanings, and spiritual symbols, or as Patel eloquently explains, “to convert surface meanings in the poem to more textured forms of significance.” While Patel’s argument for this tripartite evolution of commentarial development along a trajectory of exploration-interpretation-overinterpretation is cogent and his supporting selection of commentarial passages apt, these phases should not be considered in an overly rigid fashion. Generally, Patel does a nice job of blending boundaries, but occasionally ambiguities bring the thrust of his phases into question. Also, Patel briefly mentions a series of seventeenth-century Pahāri paintings that may be construed as visual representations of the poem; an expanded consideration of this sort of pictorial commentary would add an additional layer of depth to his project.

In the final two chapters, Patel enriches his study by moving beyond formal literary commentaries to consider the ways in which conceptions of the poem and composer have circulated in the popular imagination, both pan-Indic and regional. He engagingly explores the semi-historical and pseudo-biographical narratives that arise in accompaniment to the work, demonstrating how anecdotal legends influence its reception. This intriguing intersection of textual transmission and social exchange extends to regional interpretations as well. The *Naiṣadhīya*, which itself reveals a conscious incorporation of vernacular vocabulary and meters, spawns numerous regional-language translations that themselves stand as foundational works. In a sweeping historical survey, Patel effectively argues that these *Naiṣadhīya* translations engage established commentarial conversations while also transforming the composition's semantic possibilities for both Sanskrit and non-Sanskrit literati. While this consideration of the exchange between Sanskrit and regional languages—an area of study that calls for increased attention—is admirable and informative, the broad scope of Patel's survey occasionally results in a lurching read and it limits the depth of his findings. This chapter on regional expansion is undoubtedly valuable to his study, but would benefit from further elaboration and analysis.

Patel's project of embracing comprehensive textual biographies in order to acknowledge composers, reading communities, commentarial contexts, and literary offspring is novel in the study of South Asian literature, and should serve as a methodological model for future scholarly endeavors in Sanskrit studies and beyond. Patel's grasp of an expansive commentarial tradition is impressively rigorous, and his findings clearly demonstrate the inherent benefits of shifting one's focus beyond the text to its accompanying addenda in order to elevate the text's hermeneutical potential. An additional facet which Patel refrains from addressing, however, is the development of the *Naiṣadhīya*'s own commentarial tradition in comparison to that of other influential texts. For example, do commentarial threads surrounding other compositions reveal similar shifts in their evolution? Is there an established pattern in commentarial development, or are the changes in commentarial aims indicative of broader scholarly historical trends? A consideration of the role of the *Naiṣadhīya* in the contemporary context would also provide an additional component to his study; while Patel briefly mentions the influence of the *Naiṣadhīya* in modern Sanskrit curricula, he forgoes any substantive exploration of its current spirit. Despite these areas for growth, *Text to Tradition* is a significant and welcome addition to the field, and will advance

textual studies by encouraging scholars to expand their perspectives beyond a single textual focus and thereby enrich their studies by incorporating an array of associated sources.

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