

Dandin's Commentary on Epic Poetry (Mahākāvya)

Dandin occupies a central place in the tradition of Sanskrit literary criticism. His treatise *Kāvyaḍarśa* ("The Mirror of Poetry") is one of the earliest systematic works on *Alaṅkāraśāstra*, and it offers a detailed discussion of poetic genres, particularly epic poetry or *Mahākāvya*. Dandin's commentary on epic poetry is not merely classificatory; it establishes aesthetic, structural, and moral standards that shaped classical Indian epic tradition for centuries.

The Concept of Mahākāvya

Dandin defines *Mahākāvya* as the highest and most comprehensive form of poetry. According to him, epic poetry is distinguished by grandeur of theme, elevation of style, and artistic unity. It is not a simple narrative but an elaborate poetic construction designed to delight, instruct, and elevate the reader.

He famously observes:

"Sargabandho mahākāvyaṃ"

("An epic is a composition divided into cantos.")

This definition emphasizes formal structure, indicating that an epic must be organised into *sargas* (cantos), each carefully composed and aesthetically complete. Unlike shorter poetic forms, the epic demands architectural coherence and narrative continuity.

Subject Matter of Epic Poetry

Dandin insists that the subject of a *Mahākāvya* must be lofty and universally significant. The epic should revolve around the life of a noble hero—often a king or a semi-divine figure—whose actions influence society at large. The themes commonly include *dharma* (righteousness), *artha* (statecraft), *kāma* (love), and *mokṣa* (spiritual liberation).

He states that the hero should be:

"Udātta-nāyakaḥ"

("A hero of exalted character.")

This emphasis on moral elevation ensures that epic poetry serves an ethical purpose, not merely aesthetic pleasure. For Dandin, poetry is inseparable from value and instruction, and epic poetry is the most effective vehicle for this synthesis.

Description and Ornamental Richness

One of Dandin's most influential contributions is his insistence on ornamental description (alaṅkāra) as an essential feature of epic poetry. A Mahākāvya must include elaborate depictions of:

Cities and oceans

Mountains and seasons

Sunrise, moonrise, and nightfall

Gardens, battles, and royal processions

He remarks that an epic should be adorned with descriptions that enhance rasa and visual splendour:

“Alaṅkārair alaṅkṛtaṃ kāvyam rāmyam bhavati”

(“Poetry becomes delightful when adorned with figures of speech.”)

These descriptions are not digressions; they heighten emotional intensity and contribute to the epic's aesthetic richness.

Role of Rasa in Epic Poetry

For Dandin, rasa (aesthetic emotion) is central to all poetry, but in epic poetry, it must be sustained and elevated. While multiple rasas may appear, one dominant rasa should unify the entire work. In heroic epics, vīra rasa (the heroic sentiment) often predominates, supported by śṛṅgāra, karuṇa, and adbhuta.

He implicitly suggests that:

“A poem devoid of rasa is like a body without life.”

Thus, even the grand narrative and ornate style of the epic must ultimately serve emotional experience.

Language, Style, and Diction

Dandin advocates a refined and polished style (rīti) in epic poetry. The language must be grammatically flawless, rich in compounds, and capable of expressing subtle emotions and grand actions alike. He particularly favours the Vaidarbhī rīti, marked by clarity, elegance, and sweetness.

He cautions poets against obscurity and excessive complexity, noting that:

“Poetry should please the learned without alienating the sensitive reader.”

This balance between sophistication and accessibility is one of Dandin's enduring critical principles.

Unity and Artistic Discipline

Unlike earlier epic traditions that allowed expansive digression, Dandin stresses unity of action. Each canto should advance the central narrative, even when it includes descriptive or lyrical passages. Episodes must be organically connected to the main theme.

He observes that the epic poet must exercise discipline and restraint, ensuring that ornamentation does not overpower meaning. This marks a shift from spontaneous narrative to conscious artistic craftsmanship.

Moral and Didactic Function

Epic poetry, according to Dandin, must ultimately promote ethical reflection. The actions of the hero should inspire admiration and imitation, while negative characters serve as moral warnings. In this sense, Mahākāvya functions as both art and instruction.

He aligns poetry with cultural ideals, suggesting that:

“Poetry refines emotion while reinforcing social and moral order.”

Thus, the epic becomes a cultural text shaping collective values.

Critical Evaluation

Dandin’s commentary on epic poetry is remarkable for its systematic clarity and aesthetic sensitivity. By codifying the features of Mahākāvya, he provides later poets with a normative framework that influenced classical Sanskrit epics such as Raghuvamśa and Kirātārjuniya. However, critics have noted that his emphasis on ornamentation and formal perfection sometimes risks reducing poetry to technical brilliance rather than emotional spontaneity.

Nevertheless, his vision of epic poetry as a harmonious blend of rasa, alānkāra, narrative, and moral purpose remains foundational.

Conclusion

Dandin’s treatment of epic poetry in Kāvyaadarśa establishes Mahākāvya as the highest poetic form, demanding grandeur of theme, excellence of style, emotional depth, and moral seriousness. His commentary transforms epic poetry into a disciplined art governed by aesthetic laws rather than mere narrative impulse. By integrating beauty with ethical vision, Dandin ensures that epic poetry becomes not only a source of pleasure but also a medium of cultural and moral enlightenment.