

The Epitome of Queen Lilāvati by Jinaratna

Richard Gombrich

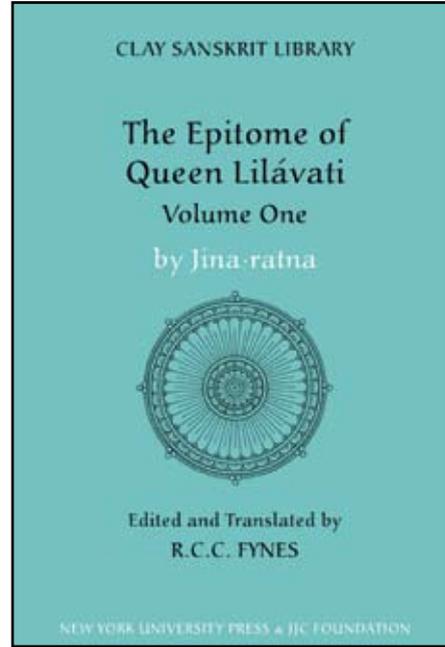
The Clay Sanskrit Library was founded by John Clay, a financier who read Sanskrit at Oxford. He was struck by how little the western world knew of India's classical literature, namely epics, plays, poetry and fictional narrative. By putting on the market at reasonable prices some attractively produced editions of these works, with translations on the facing pages, like those published by the *Loeb Classical Library*, he also hoped to stimulate the flagging interest in learning Sanskrit. No initial selection of Sanskrit literature could neglect the two great epics, the *Mahābhārata* and the *Rāmāyaṇa*, or the most famous plays, such as Kālidāsa's *Śakuntalā*, but in order to give some idea of a cross section of what is available, examples of Buddhist and Jain literature had to be included alongside the Brahminical/Hindu works. We therefore invited Dr Richard Fynes, who had already produced a volume of Jain stories, "The Lives of the Jain Elders", for *Penguin Classics*, to choose a work for translation. Dr Fynes decided upon *The Epitome of Queen Lilāvati* by Jinaratna. This will soon be joined by Dr Somdev Vasudeva's translation (again in 2 volumes) of Merutunga's "Twenty-four Chronicles" (*Caturviṃśati-prabandha*).

Why an Epitome?

The arts in ancient India were composed at leisure, performed at leisure, and intended to be enjoyed at leisure. It was nothing like our world of timetables, productivity measures and deadlines. The finest temples, many of them huge, had every inch of their surfaces elaborately carved; the only limits on the quality and quantity of both materials and workmen were probably set by what the patron could afford -- and the patron was often a king, able to extort more wealth when he needed it.

In the same way, literary works tended to be enormously long. A play had to last all night, or even several nights. People did not buy books; literature was mostly consumed by listening to recitations, and the longer they lasted, the better. There were short forms, like miniature paintings: single stanza poems, usually highly wrought. But even these tended to be used in collections -- of a hundred verses, or even seven hundred. At the other extreme was the great Sanskrit epic, the *Mahābhārata*, eight times the length of the whole of Homer, and ancestor, like the *Rāmāyaṇa*, to many other lengthy epics in many Indian languages.

The simple fact that most works of Indian classical literature are very long has probably been a major obstacle to its diffusion in translation, and hence to its becoming known in the modern world and fully joining the corpus of world literature. People don't feel that they have the time to read such long books, and so publishers find it uneconomic to publish them. Only about half the



volumes in the *Clay Sanskrit Library* stand alone as single-volume works, and some of the single volumes are over five hundred pages long. The latter fact, however, can be misleading, because half the pages, those on the left, are occupied by the Sanskrit original.

The book under review is an epitome, because it is an abbreviated version of a much longer work, *The Story of Lilāvati's Final Emancipation*. That work, written in Prakrit in 1036 by a Jain monk called Jineśvara, is lost. *The Epitome*, written in 1285 by another Jain monk, Jinaratna, is in Sanskrit, and survives only in a single manuscript. Unfortunately this manuscript has a few gaps in it, mostly near the beginning, but not enough seriously to hamper one's appreciation of the work. Besides, some of the difficulties in the text may be due to corruption; without another copy to check against, it can be hard to tell.

Language and Milieu

The Epitome is a collection of connected stories, written in verse in correct classical Sanskrit. Most of the verse is in the commonest Sanskrit metre, the *anuṣṭubh*, also widely but inaccurately known as the *śloka*; this metre is even more flexible than the functionally comparable Latin/Greek hexameter and is the favourite for lengthy narrative. Following classical convention, the author also occasionally, and particularly at the end of a canto, will show off his mastery of much more complicated metres.

Jainism and Buddhism both originated as protests against Brahminism. One aspect of their protest was

that whereas brahmins regarded Sanskrit as a sacred language with an inherent connection to reality, these heterodox religions insisted on using the vernacular languages, forms of Middle Indo-Aryan. Middle Indo-Aryan is the modern term for languages derived directly from Sanskrit; in the Indian tradition these are called Prakrits. Buddhism and Jainism used Prakrits both in order to be more accessible and to emphasise the conventional character of language. However, vernaculars change over time and space, whereas Sanskrit has remained more or less frozen. So it came about that early in the common era, about half a millennium after its birth, Buddhism began to use Sanskrit as a more efficient means of communication with a wide public. At first, Buddhist Sanskrit was nothing more than Buddhist Prakrit dressed up in Sanskrit phonetics; but soon for certain purposes Buddhist authors started using classical Sanskrit – of course with the addition of some Buddhist technical vocabulary. Rather later, near the middle of the first millennium CE, Jains began to do the same thing. Thus Jain Sanskrit superficially looks like normal classical Sanskrit, but it tends to include vocabulary not known to the Brahmin/Hindu tradition. There is no clear line of demarcation between distinctively Jain Sanskrit and normal Sanskrit written by Jains; it depends mainly on the context.

What is clear, however, is that throughout Indian history Sanskrit, with its complex grammar and huge vocabulary, has been understood only by highly educated people, a small minority of the population. This minority generally was comprised of members of the upper castes, and indeed most of them were brahmins. But, except perhaps at the very beginning, hardly any brahmins became Jains.

And yet in mediaeval times many works of Jain literature, and in particular of imaginative literature, were composed in Sanskrit. (Few of them have yet been translated into any language.) Evidently young monks were taught Sanskrit, and a few became Sanskrit scholars. That monks read and wrote stories is not itself particularly strange, since Jain stories are generally permeated with Jain values – the horror of violence, the perils of self-indulgence, the superior satisfactions of renunciation – and illustrate the workings of the moral law of karma, that the effects of good and bad deeds are felt for life after life.

The majority of Jain Sanskrit literary works were, like this one, written in Gujarat and western Rajasthan. In this area there were not only important communities of prosperous Jain traders, but also several Jain princely courts. Courts were also cultural centres, on which learned brahmins depended for patronage; they also employed brahmins as clerks and administrators. The modern insistence on the separate cultural identity of, for example, Jains and Hindu brahmins should not blind us to the fact that they shared much of their culture. Many learned works by brahmins attest to their knowledge of the relevant Jain literature. We can imagine that works such as this one found an appreciative audience when

they were read aloud either at court or at the kind of assembly halls donated to the community by rich merchants.

For all that, in terms of the whole population the audience must have been drawn from a very small educated élite. Thus it is not surprising that this work survives in only one manuscript, while the work on which it is based (written in classical Prakrit, which by that period was no more accessible than Sanskrit) has been wholly lost, like many others. The surprise is rather, to my mind, that these long Sanskrit works were written at all.

Since the original is in Sanskrit, not a vernacular language, Richard Fynes has fittingly chosen to translate it into somewhat formal English. For all that, I find that his prose runs smoothly and is easy to read. His well-written introduction also packs a lot of information into ten pages.

Genre

Jinaratna states his aims at the outset. He will privilege narrative over description, and narrate in a comparatively plain and simple style. Like a lump of sugar soaked in medicine, his condensation of the story is intended to be a sweetener to convey to polite society a willingness to listen – he means, of course, to Jain teachings.

In this kind of work modern readers should not expect to find much depiction of individual character or psychological subtlety. The stories are action-packed, picaresque, and at times even baroque in flavour. There is never the slightest doubt about who or what is good or bad. Despite many disasters along the way, for the main heroes and heroines a happy ending is assured. On the other hand, Jinaratna's idea of a happy ending is very far from what most of us would expect, or indeed hope for ourselves: it is to attain escape from the cycle of rebirth through asceticism and understanding of how the passions imprison us in an otherwise endless experience of suffering.

In Indian narrative literature there is almost always a good deal of boxing: stories are told within stories. This can be a problem for the reader who would like to dip into the book more or less at random. In this book there is a frame story for the whole work, concerning a queen called Lilāvati and her family, but otherwise its structure is not too complicated. The reader must be ready to be jolted from one life to the next as karma takes its course, but will enjoy this roller-coaster ride through *samsāra*.

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