

Book Review

Deven M. Patel. *Text to tradition: The Naiṣadhīyacarita and literary community in South Asia.* New York: Columbia University Press, 2014, xi + 277 pp. ISBN 978-0-231-16680-5. \$65.00/£50.00 (Hardback)
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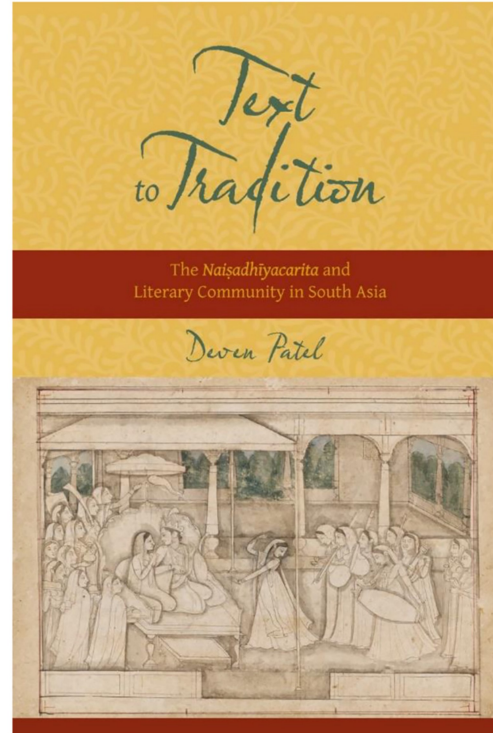


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After several decades, Deven M. Patel makes bold to shed a new light on the poem that is known as “the most difficult of all *mahākāvyas* in the Sanskrit literature” (Jani 1957: ix), the *Naiṣadhīyacarita* by Śrīharṣa. This he does not by analysing the poem on its own, but by taking the perspective of the audience, who throughout history read, appreciated and experienced the *kāvya* composition in changing ways. As such, Patel’s reception history of the *Naiṣadhīya* responds to Pollock’s (2003) critical appeals to rethink our approach to Sanskrit literary history. Patel is interested in the emic perspective on Sanskrit literary culture: how did readers interpret the poem over time, how did they define their relationship to the authoritative literary work, and the relationship between the poem and its predecessors? In search of valid answers to these questions, Patel analyses a large corpus of commentaries, biographical narratives and “translations” dating from the thirteenth to the twentieth century. These textual products of the scholarly practices that grew around the *Naiṣadhīya* is what Patel calls the *Naiṣadhīya* tradition. With his analysis of the *Naiṣadhīya* as a tradition Patel tells the coherent story of a singular work mediated through different audiences, and provides indispensable insights into the receptive practices of literary culture in South Asia over a time-span of eight centuries.

Patel’s study is divided into seven chapters, excluding the Introduction (pp. 1–16) and Conclusion (pp. 203–210), that are loosely structured along the lines of chronology and types of sources. The largest part of the book (chapters two to five) is devoted to commentaries on the *Naiṣadhīya*, and in my opinion puts forward the



strongest points in Patel's study. In chapters six and seven Patel extends his source material to legendary stories and "translations" of the poem. This review will first summarize the book's content, before giving a critical appraisal of it.

In order to contextualize his study, Patel opens his book with chapter one "The *Naiṣadhīya*'s aesthetic" (pp. 17–48) that discusses the place of the *Naiṣadhīya* within the *mahākāvya* genre, and highlights the typifying aesthetic aspects of the text that have been essential in how the work was evaluated and experienced by later audiences. The poem is categorized by Patel as a mature *mahākāvya* that abounds in literary craft due to its colourful play on words and sound, and its rich images. Patel illustrates this aesthetic characteristic by quoting several of the poem's beautiful verses that express the avant-guard aspirations in Śrīharṣa's complex language. This unconventionality has struck audiences until the present day, sometimes to their frustration, sometimes to their delight. In his selective introduction that offers "a glimpse into the *Naiṣadhīya*" (p. 22), Patel presents Śrīharṣa not only as a poet, but also as an Advaita Vedānta philosopher who stresses the importance of yogic practice. Śrīharṣa authored several philosophical works, and saw the *Naiṣadhīya* itself as a product of spiritual realization and a "sibling" to his philosophical work, the *Khaṇḍanakhaṇḍakhādya*. To fortify this identification, Patel extracts several passages from the *Naiṣadhīya* that illustrate the author's conviction that "truth can only be ultimately apprehended through yogic practice" (p. 28).

In chapter two "Eight centuries of commentary" (pp. 49–80), Patel renders a chronological overview of eight centuries of commentarial tradition, that testifies to the geographical extent to which the *Naiṣadhīya* was discussed, and to the ways in which the commentarial genre evolves and shifts. The first period discerned by Patel comprises commentaries from the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries (by Vidyādhara, Cāṇḍupaṇḍita, Isānadeva, Narahari and Bhavadatta). These early commentaries mainly seek to structure the reading of the new and strange poem by providing a lens through which it becomes accessible to the audience. Commentaries from the late fourteenth century and the fifteenth century mark a moment where the *Naiṣadhīya* becomes an integral part of the scholastic poetical "canon", called the *pañcamahākāvya*. Using Mallinātha, the most notable commentator of this period, Patel demonstrates how commentaries played a role in poetical pedagogy, and argues that writing a commentary would have been a necessary step in the evolution of a young scholar's career. By the third phase of the commentarial tradition, during the sixteenth century, the *Naiṣadhīya* appears to have been well-established as a canonical text. Commentaries from this period are more demanding and focus on the poets underlying esoteric meanings (Nārāyaṇa), or else are more anthological in scope (Śrīdhara and Lakṣmaṇabhatta). The seventeenth century, the beginning of Patel's final phase, seems to form a climax in the commentarial tradition in terms of

numbers, geographical spread as well as format.¹ After that, the following three centuries saw a rapid decline of commentarial production. None of the commentaries from this period show innovativeness. This is why Patel sees it as a period of consolidation.

Chapter three “The *Naiṣadhīya* interpreted and overinterpreted” (pp. 81–106) reviews this chronology with a focus on the interpretation of the *Naiṣadhīya* by its commentators from a literary–critical perspective. Patel here seeks to elude “the shifting paradigms of social and aesthetic practices of reading, teaching and learning in Sanskrit literary culture” (p. 82). With this objective Patel addresses the reader outside of *kāvya* studies who is interested in the characteristics of literary cultures in general. Patel finds inspiration in the perspectives of Eco and Bourdieu on the author–reader relationship, to approach the commentaries as a collective that is guided by the original author of the poem, and as sharing readings and interpretations with each other. A first dual trend of commentary he discerns is the difference between a “weak pedagogy” of reading (*kathambhūtinī*; Cāṇḍupaṇḍita) and a reading for more advanced students (*anvayamukhī*; Mallinātha). Both styles highlight the educational function of the *Naiṣadhīya* but differ in the room for interpretation they leave for the students of the text. Around the sixteenth century Patel recognizes a temporal shift towards a more freely styled commentary, such as the commentary by Nārāyaṇa, which he argues was informed by the fact that readers were already quite familiar with the *Naiṣadhīya* and its content. These commentaries combine a technical analysis with giving multiple interpretations of the work. Yet another paradigm of *Naiṣadhīya* readership focuses on the philosophical agenda that can be read in Śrīharṣa’s poem. Cāṇḍupaṇḍita, for example, discusses in detail possible answers to a philosophical problem posed in the poem. Also within this paradigm is the tendency, demonstrated by Nārāyaṇa, to overinterpret the possible meanings of the poem. In closing his chapter, Patel argues pointedly how these different trends set the grounds for reading and appreciating the *Naiṣadhīya* over time. As such, they navigated the relationship between the author of the poem and its readers.

In chapter four “Struggles over the text” (pp. 107–130), Patel deals with the history of text-critical discussions around the *Naiṣadhīya*. What did early Sanskrit scholars consider to be the “correct” version of the text, and what lineages could be discerned in these editorial practices? By subjecting the *Naiṣadhīya* to such linguistic scrutiny, Patel aptly remarks, commentaries participated in the intellectual debate within Sanskrit literary culture on what makes good poetry. To illustrate his point, Patel analyses several examples of commentaries that emend grammar and even

¹ Patel interestingly points out the creation of a series of Pahāri paintings on the Nala-Damayantī story that are accompanied by a Sanskrit commentarial gloss.

phonemes (Haridāra, Gāgābhaṭṭa), or others that defend Śrīharṣa's unconventional poetics (Gaḍadhāra). Another kind of text-critical readership is practiced by scribes who sometimes made emendations in copying the manuscripts of *Naiṣadhīya* commentaries. By including these examples, Patel supports the growing attention to the inclusion of manuscript evidence in evaluating literary practices. They highlight the different agents that simultaneously mediated readership of the *Naiṣadhīya* and the tensions that existed between these trained intellectuals. Next to questioning the poem's linguistic adequacy, commentaries also express a debate about the work's completeness that according to Patel must have occupied audiences from an early stage.

From the sixteenth century onwards, Patel discerns a “secondary wave of reading” that is characterized by a hermeneutic urge to “overinterpret” and to “allegorize” (chapter five “Secondary waves of reading”, pp. 131–152). Both trends feed on earlier reading practices and are facilitated by the poetical choices of Śrīharṣa himself. As such, the *śleṣa* verses of the *Pañcanalīya* chapter of the poem lend themselves to analyses of their polyvalent readings and stimulated the circulation of the chapter as an independent work that could serve pedagogical purposes. Secondly, Śrīharṣa's identification as a proponent of Advaita Vedānta stimulated commentators well into the twentieth century to read the work as a spiritual allegory to perfect oneself in Advaita Vedānta philosophy, or to achieve a Tāntrika ideology. Here, Patel draws in the literary–historical context of developing devotionism and of allegorical readings of the epics. Both trends formed important influences on the emergence of these “secondary waves of reading”, as well as of legends that evolved around the poet and his poem.

These latter legends of the poet are the topic of chapter six of the book, “Legends of the *Naiṣadhīya*” (pp. 153–174). Here, Patel traces the biographical narratives within commentaries and within the more elaborate *prabandha* texts. They developed during the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries and were most likely influenced by oral traditions. Whereas the commentaries include elements that become staple discussion in later legendary stories, it is Rājaśekhāra's account in the *prabandhakośa* that becomes the standard conception of Śrīharṣa's biography. This Jain author follows the *Naiṣadhīya*'s story to Kashmir where Śrīharṣa is supposed to have demonstrated his intellectual capabilities at the court, and then to Gujarat where Śrīharṣa's own relative, Harihara, presented the *Naiṣadhīya* to the famous Jain king Vastupāla. Another “regionalizing” strategy links the poet to the Gauḍa country, as found in the *Puruṣaparīkṣā* by Vidyāpathi. These competing localizations of the poet reflect, as Patel interestingly puts forward, that the “poet's activity [...] takes in the sweep of multiple regional experiences” (p. 172). The legends also connect Śrīharṣa to other famous poets in the Sanskrit school system as facing rivalry, namely Udayana and Mammaṭa. Patel evaluates this as evidencing a historically significant perspective

“that Śrīharṣa’s boldness (*prāgalbhya*) as a poet has never been universally admired by all audiences” (p. 169). As a conclusion Patel correctly moves away from a historical validation of these legends to appreciate them as “imaginative reconstructions of both a received and studied historical consciousness of past events and processes” (p. 172), that frame the receptive history of the *Naiṣadhīya*.

In his seventh and final chapter, “The tradition expands to the regions” (pp. 175–201), Patel takes a look at the different “translations” of the *Naiṣadhīyacarita*. These “translations” adapted Śrīharṣa’s text into regional languages and into Sanskrit, and, according to Patel, express a “commentarial consciousness” that makes it difficult to completely disconnect them from a category of commentaries. Different intralingual “translations” (e.g. by Bhālaṅ and Śrīnātha) used different strategies in dealing with the source text, such as expanding or condensing Śrīharṣa’s verses. Patel understands their main purpose as to make the *mahākāvya* accessible to a regional audience. This indeed accords with statements found in other kinds of vernacular translations. For the interlingual translations (e.g. by Kṛṣṇānanda), Patel argues that they lie closer to the commentaries, because their strategies are even more reminiscent of the commentarial texts, and because they are written for an audience who knows Sanskrit. As a conclusion to this chapter, Patel suggests that commentaries and translations not only exhibit several similarities, but also that commentaries mediated the conversation between the creative texts of Sanskrit literary culture and the new regional-language literatures. Patel’s analysis that looks at translations through commentaries provides a new perspective on the specific translatory tradition of South-Asian literary culture that I believe might be fruitful in gaining a comprehensive understanding of this tradition.

The book concludes with two appendices, 1: “Sanskrit text of citations from commentaries and narratives” (pp. 211–228) and 2: “Encomia (*praśasti*) to Śrīharṣa and the *Naiṣadhīya*” (pp. 229–232), followed by a Bibliography (pp. 261–268) and Index (pp. 269–277).

As I am not an expert of *kāvya* literature, my appraisal of Patel’s study will mainly highlight those points that are valuable to a broader audience interested in Sanskrit or South-Asian literary culture. As a whole, the book is a well-written, excellent piece of research that serves both as a comprehensive introduction to the *Naiṣadhīyacarita* as well as a thorough analysis of its receptive history. The book presents the classical Sanskrit poem in a way that appeals to a broad audience by quoting several of its beautiful verses in excellent translation, but also sheds a new light on the poem by approaching it from the perspective of its afterlife. As such, the book fits perfectly into the *South Asia Across the Disciplines* series of which it is part. Patel should also be applauded for his expertise and for the amount of work he has put into his study. The book treats an enormous corpus

of sources and demonstrates Patel's expert knowledge of both scholastic and poetical Sanskrit.

In more detail, Patel's study comprises several important contributions to the study of Indian literary culture. Next to his insights of how the afterlife of the *Naiṣadhīya* was guided by the poet's own suggestions on how to think about the poem, Patel's argument for the pedagogical function of the *Naiṣadhīya* is worth highlighting. In a lucid way, Patel explains how the commentaries were not just pedagogical tools to gain access into a complex poem, but in fact works established, like the *Naiṣadhīya*, to become pedagogical tools for the continuation of Sanskrit learning themselves. Drawing from this, he suggests how the formation of the *pañcamahākāvya* as Sanskrit literary canon was informed by a specific educational purpose. Rather than establishing a scheme of excellence, the Sanskrit canon conveyed a variety of possible inspirations of the *kāvya* genre's potential. These insights by Patel are important for our understanding not only of the *Naiṣadhīya*, but also of the function and categorization of the *mahākāvya* genre. Moreover, they shed light onto the different possible understandings of a literary canon.

On a critical note, there are some aspects on which Patel in my opinion could have been more complete. Firstly, there are several occasions where he should have added a source reference. For example, when giving biographical information about Jinarāja, Patel does not include a reference to the primary or secondary source that provides this information (p. 69). My second comment is informed by my perspective as a scholar of Jaina studies. At several places in the book Patel notices the engagement of Jain authors with the *Naiṣadhīya* (see p. 69, p. 243 fn. 53, and chapter 6). However, Patel does not – in Pollock's tradition – pick up on this aspect in his conclusion. A reflection that brings together all these references, and concludes what this might mean in terms of religious affiliation, would have been a valuable addition to the book. For example, the narration by Rājaśekhara that puts Śrīharṣa in a bad light, by presenting courtly scandals at the end of his life (p. 168), might suggest how a Jain audience negotiated religious difference in its appreciation of literary works. From the perspective of Jain literature, it is hard not to read the ruminations of the twice-born poet about his lack of knowledge and his decision to become an ascetic as critical, after Rājaśekhara's biographical account full of praise. The quote by Jinarāja (p. 69) suggests, in my opinion, Jinarāja's awareness that Śrīharṣa belonged to a different religious tradition:

My work has been prepared with the assistance of many researchers who are aware of the numerous recent philosophical texts referenced in the *Naiṣadhīya*. These researchers, who are expounders of the Jain point of view, are learned men in all the various *śāstras*, including literature, the dictionaries, poetics, metrics, grammar, logic, etc. (Jinarāja, *Naiṣadhīya-sukhāvabodha*, trans. Patel, p. 69)

At the same time, Jinarāja does recognise that the poet's *mahākāvya* was and should be studied by Jain scholars in order to complete their knowledge of the various *śāstras*, including literature. This indicates that the *Naiṣadhīya* was also used for pedagogical purposes within Jain circles and adds to the note by John Cort (2001: 336) of how Kālidāsa's *Raghuvamśa* was part of the Jain curriculum of Sanskrit learning. A paragraph on this would have been valuable for the field of Jaina Studies as it pertains to the history of Jain education, and it would have fortified the idea of a general scholastic tradition of Sanskrit literary culture that bridges explicit religious differences.

These minor criticisms aside, Patel's book is without doubt a valuable addition to the *South Asia Across the Disciplines* series. It offers important new insights to the study of the *Naiṣadhīyacarita* and above all sets out an inspiring model for the study of texts that is able to approach related – though historically and geographically disperse – texts, through a comprehensive overarching frame.

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