

# Creators of Telugu Epic Literature

A COLLECTION OF FIVE SHORT ESSAYS ON POETS WHO  
COMPOSED EPIC LITERATURE IN TELUGU

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## Preface

Regional literature holds a place of utmost significance in the Indic civilization. It connects the contemporary to the timeless. One of the most cherished memory of my childhood is the Telugu poetry from the Andhra Maha Bhagavatamu taught in my childhood by parents and grandparents. That remains the strongest bridge to my roots. That stayed as the treasure that nobody could snatch away from me. It was a natural pursuit of my curiosity to explore the personalities who composed the immortal epics. They deserve a special place for multiple reasons. They disseminated the epic knowledge otherwise limited to those with knowledge of Sanskrit through melodious and innocent sounding but deep poetry in regional languages that steals the hearts of scholars and commoners alike. They established a firm legacy of creative liberty while not compromising on the scholarly aptitude. They played a great role of connecting a commoner's heart with the cosmic philosophy. The poets who composed the epic literature thus held a special position in my heart and I considered it a much owed tribute to read and write about their challenges.

The poets studied in these essays are the trinity (Kavitrayamu -Nannaya, Tikkana and Yerrapragada), Bamera Pothana and Kavayatri Mollamamba. Readers of this booklet would get a bird's eye view of the socio political conditions that led to composing Andhra Mahabharatamu and the inspirations and styles of the poets who composed Bhagavatamu and Ramayanamu. Readers might find the nature of each essay different from that of others, this is mainly because of the conditions that led to the composition of each of these epics. The poets who compose Andhra MahaBharatamu were closely connected to royalty and have been first hand witnesses to the socio political upheaval in those times. Combining the ageless wisdom of Mahabharata with their own experiences, they have composed Andhra Mahabharatamu (as the wise ones say, history repeated itself).

Pothana and Mollamamba composed Bhagavatamu and Ramayanamu respectively, but their inspiration was highly philosophical and devotional. Away from the political intrigues, they enjoyed a poetical liberty that took the philosophical narrative to a new high. One can appreciate the uniqueness of each poet when one reads the unabridged epics with a historical hindsight. My endeavor would be considered successful if even a portion of the readers would proceed to study these works and derive the unique combination of knowledge, wisdom and poetical pleasure.

This booklet is a part of my ongoing work which started as a simple blogging effort and in future, I hope to write a similar series on the composers of Prabandhas and the Vaggeyakaras. This edition is not professionally edited and is currently meant for a non-profitable distribution to spread awareness among readers who are enthusiastic to know more about Telugu poets. The pictures are sourced from internet and used for purely educational purposes. I did not intend to infringe on copyrights. If any inadvertent infringement is spotted, please leave me a message and I promise to make corrective edits as soon as possible.

Short essays by no means do justice to the lives of these great poets and I strongly urge the readers to go through the list of references is given at the foot of each essay and read more.

May the Gods and Goddesses of intellect and knowledge light our path to awareness.

## Acknowledgements

Where else would a child get his or her first words from, if not the lap of its mother? I am fortunate that my mother, Smt Usha Krishna Swamy, made sure that the beautiful poetry is also a part of those first words that I learnt to speak. My father, Sri Krishna Swamy Kumar, had a unique way of hooking me with the poems and it was always a playful activity for me to learn and recite the poems. I owe similar feeling of gratitude to my grandparents, uncles and aunts who made me celebrate every family activity of poetry recitation. I fondly remember my Telugu teachers in school for cementing my passion towards Telugu literature.

The very first essay in this series is the one on Bammara Pothana was written after the incessant encouragement by Sri Ratnakar Sadasyula, an active blogger and author. I am also grateful to Deepa Garimella, Ravi Kandala, Jayanth Tadinada and Srikanth, the team behind Pittagoda for publishing the series on Andhra Mahabagavatamu which had started as a series of tweets. Fortunately Deepa saw those tweets and encouraged me to convert it into an essay and I am happy that I did so. Social Media has a way of bringing people together and galvanizing creativity and it does deserve all my gratitude. There were a lot of Social media connections who supported my blog posts in a number of ways. Thank you everyone.

Apart from the above, a big thank you to Richa Singh whose idea of the ebook carnival made me compile these essays into this booklet.

## Andhra Maha Bharatamu - Kavitravam

*Whenever the Vedic legacy faces a crisis, the fifth Veda, which is the Mahabharata, takes a new shape to redefine Dharma.*

This is a rough translation of a statement made in the preface to the Andhra Mahabharatamu edition by Tirumala Tirupati Devasthanams (TTD). The socio political conditions that led to the composition of Andhra Mahabharatamu validate the statement. The Telugu version of the epic Mahabharata has a unique distinction of being composed by not one, but three poets belonging to three different generations. It took close to 300 years for this book to reach completion. These three poets are collectively called as Kavitravam ("Poet Trinity") among the Telugu literary sphere. The scope of this post is to observe the conditions that inspired each of the poets to take up this work.

### Nannayya Bhattaraka

Nannayya, who existed in the 11th Century CE, was the guru of Raja Raja Narendra, the Eastern Chalukyan King who ruled over the Vengi Empire. The political conditions that led to his ascension had a strong bearing on the translation of the Mahabharata.

Raja Raja Narendra was the son of King Vimaladitya of Vengi Chalukyas. Upon Vimaladitya's death, he faced opposition from his step-brother Vijayaditya. Prince Vijayaditya was influenced by his mother, Princess Melavamba, who was sympathetic to the Jain cause.

Raja Raja Narendra's mother, Kundavamba, was a Chola princess and the sister of the Emperor Rajendra Chola-I. She was an ardent follower of the Shaiva thought. In the strife that ensued, Vijayaditya was supported by Jayasimha of the Western Chalukyas, while the Chola emperor Rajendra supported his nephew.

Raja Raja Narendra prevailed and ascended the throne. In the course of the intrigues and strife that preceded his ascension, Narendra made some observations of common folk. He observed that the Jaina and Bauddha traditions endeared themselves to the common folk by having their literature available in the common tongue. Vedic literature, on the other hand, was a captive of a few scholars who had the knowledge of Sanskrit, and common folk had begun to feel uncomfortable

about depending upon them for their knowledge. Adding to this, Pampakavi had composed "Vikramarjuna Vijaya", a retelling of the Mahabharata in Kannada, in which he established the supremacy of the Jain thought over the Vedic thought.

Raja Raja Narendra's concern rested on the glorification of renunciation by Jain culture and the undermining of the householder ("grihastha") who was actually the social, cultural and economic backbone of the household, society and the state. The due respect of the householders, who were critical to any state or empire, he believed, could be restored only by restoring Vedic thought through a language appreciated by the common folk. This led to his requesting Nannayya Bhattaraka to take upon the task of translating the fifth Veda to Telugu.

Nannayya, who empathized with Raja Raja Narendra's observations, had a daunting task before him. Telugu, as a language, lacked an independent grammatical structure in his days. Thus, he took on the job of scrutinizing Telugu vocabulary, and produced the "Andhra Shabda Chintamani", a grammatical treatise in Telugu, largely inspired from Panini's Ashtadhyayi, while sticking to a five-fold grammatical structure (samjnā, sandhi, ajanta, halanta, kriya, as per "A Comparative Study Of Andhrasabdachintamani And Balavyakaranam"). The work earned him the titles "Sabda SAsana" and "vAgAnuSAsana".

After carving the linguistic path for the Telugu language, Nannayya started on the Andhreekarana of Mahabharata. I use the term "Andhreekarana" instead of "translation" because Nannayya's style of composition cannot be termed as a true translation of Krishna Dwaipayana Vyasa's Moola Mahabharata. It also cannot be termed as a reconstruction or a retelling. According to the scholars who critiqued the text, the focus of Vyasa's Mahabharata rested on the SAstra. Nannayya, while maintaining the spirit of this SAstra, took liberties with the kAvya element of the text. It goes without saying that there were a few plot deviations in his part of Andhra Mahabharatamu. This text thus covered linguistic as well as socio-philosophical lacunae that existed in 11th Century Telugu land.

Nannayya, coveting the title of Adikavi in Telugu, completed the Adi and Sabha Parvas of the Andhra Mahabharata. The Adikavi's life, and thus that of his trail-blazing pen, came to an abrupt end in the middle of Aranya Parva though there are differing opinions about the Aranya Parva's completion.

It was a totally different socio-political situation that motivated the second poet, Tikkanna Somayaji, to continue this Yajna of Andhreekarana, more than 200 years after the death of Nannayya, and we shall see why, in my next post.

*References and further reading:*

Preface of Srimad Andhra Mahabharatamu - TTD Edition

Andhra Kavula Charitramu - Sri Kandukuri Veerashalingam Pantulu



## Tikkanna Somayaji

This essay will dwell on *Kavibrahma* Tikkanna Somayaji, who continued the *Andhreekarana* of Mahabharata, which was left incomplete with the death of *Adikavi* Nannayya.



Picture source: Internet

Tikkanna Somayaji lived in the thirteenth century CE during the Kakatiya period. The socio-political conditions in which Nannayya and Tikkanna lived were totally different. Nannayya's aim was to give an intellectual response, rooted in Vedic philosophy, to the Jain supremacist arguments put up by earlier poets. However, Tikkanna's inspiration sprung from the various divisions in the society arising due to extremist elements of different faiths.

The divisions between Shaivas and Vaishnavas had broken the limits of philosophical rivalry and escalated to social rivalry. The religious extremism manifested with followers of each religion resorting to displaying open symbols, discouraging the plurality of Vedic thought based on the Six Darshanas, and even going to the extent of denouncing/harming the followers of other religions. This also seeped into the political discourse, and caused the collapse of empires and the fall of dynasties.

It is speculated that the Battle of Palanadu (Palanati Yuddham), a war between the hostile cousins of Kalachuri Haiheyas, exploited these religious differences. Other dynasties from south India

chose their sides in their bid to control the region, and the war, proverbially equated to the Kurukshetra war of Mahabharata, left no victors. The historical relevance of the war is a matter of another essay. But this 12th century tragedy left the populace disgruntled and divided for decades.

Scholars opine that these differences drove Tikkana to start a movement establishing the unity of "Hari" and "Hara", called "Harihara-Advaita" or "Harihara-Abheda". Tikkana chose to not challenge the religiosity, and instead inspired a philosophical sense of unity between the two gods under whose names the rivalry was prevalent. Though the concept of the oneness of Shiva and Vishnu did exist since ancient times (here is a collection of ancient quotes by Sandeep Nangia), the situation before had never demanded that it become a movement.

Lord Harihara natha, according to Tikkana, manifested in Tikkana's mind in response to his agonised prose, whose translation is as below:

**Do you differentiate between the chain of skulls and the Kaustubha gem when both adorn your neck? Do you like the poison you consumed to save the world or the loving breast milk of Yashoda?**



Legend says as per Hariharanatha's instructions, Tikkana took up the task of continuing the Andhra Mahabharatamu, and dedicated his part of the epic to him. He wrote from the 4th Parva (Virata Parva) to the last Parva, that is, Svargarohana Parva. He did not attempt the part of the Aranya Parva, left mid-way by Nannayya. The eminent scholar and Maha Sahasravadhani Dr. Garikipati

Narasimha Rao, in a lecture series, disagrees with the notion and says that Nannayya had in fact completed the Aranya Parva which is why Tikkana resumed the epic from the Virata Parva.

Tikkana Somayaji's style of blending Telugu and Sanskrit, which appealed to the poets of both languages, earned him the title "Ubhaya Kavi Mitra". Tikkana also earned the title "Kavi Brahma", for his fine way of presenting idealism with rich imagination and poetical feats.

It is to be noted that the later poet Bammara Potana, too, was influenced by the concept of "Harihara-Abheda". The influence is seen in his equanimity of dealing with both the deities in his Andhra Mahabagavatamu. According to Nanduri Rama Krishnacharya, other poets like Srinatha and Nachana Somanatha acknowledged Tikkana's style and tried to imitate it at times but could not reach his level of sculpting poetry. Nachana Somanatha also dedicated his works to the deity Hariharanatha.

## A Reflection of Contemporary Experiences

It is also worthy of observation that Tikkana was enriched by his experience spanning across diplomacy, philosophy, literature, social issues and literary mastery, each of which made his part of the epic unique. He witnessed his king and patron, King Manumasiddhi of Nellore, get dethroned by his cousin Katamaraja. Tikkana, being his minister, appealed to the Kakatiya emperor Ganapatideva to help out Manumasiddhi. Ganapatideva's intervention turned the tables and enabled the exiled King of Nellore to come out of secrecy and win back his kingdom. Tikkana also took part in the strategizing of the war, following which, Ganapatideva prevented Katamaraja from receiving any military aid from allies like Velanati Kulottunga Choda (not to be confused with the Tamil King Kulotunga Chola). As a result, Katamaraja was weakened, and was defeated by Manumasiddhi.

It is known that to impress Ganapatideva, Tikkana engaged in a philosophical debate with the Bauddha and Jaina scholars, and defeated them using the concept of Harihara-Advaita. He also delighted the emperor with a unique commentary on Vyasa's Mahabharata, highlighting the aspects of diplomatic missions and importance of Dharma in political strategies. Ganapatideva was impressed, and offered to intervene, favouring Manumasiddhi.

To state in a permitted level of exaggeration, Tikkana was to Manumasiddhi what Krishna was to the Pandavas and what Chanakya was to the Mauryas. His section of Mahabharata, including

the incognito exile of the Pandavas, diplomatic missions, preparation for war, the war itself and the re-establishment of Dharma, is enriched with his own real life experiences.

His other works include Nirvachanottara Ramayanamu, Harihara-Advaita Darshanamu, Kavi Vagbandhanamu and Vijayasenamu.

The 1963 Telugu Puranic film Nartanasala, directed by Kamalakara Kameshwara Rao has captured a lot of poems from Tikkana's Virata Parvamu. The poems depicting Draupadi's warning to Keechaka, Arjuna's challenge to Duryodhana ([www.youtube.com/watch?v=NxzNZ2OE24Q](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NxzNZ2OE24Q)), Arjuna's adulation to Dharmanandana ([https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6DivKsz\\_5HQ](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6DivKsz_5HQ)) and the description of Kaurava warriors by their flags ([https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=B\\_TqkYWfAFU](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=B_TqkYWfAFU)) are some of the examples.

References and further reading:

Kavitrayamu by Nanduri Rama Krishnacharya

Andhra Mahabharatamu Vol 6 - Virata Parvamu - TTD edition

Andhra Kavula Charitra by Kandukuri Veeresalingam Pantulu

## Yerrapragada

This is the last post in my three-piece series about Andhra Mahabharatamu and the three poets who contributed to this epic project that spanned almost to 3 centuries. The first two posts were on the contributions of Adikavi Nannayya and Tikkanna Somayaji.

With Tikkanna Somayaji's marathon contribution, the Andhreekarana of Mahabharata was almost complete, except for the second half of the Aranya Parva left incomplete by Adi Kavi Nannayya. Some scholars opine that a superstition was the reason that Tikkanna stayed away from this part. Others opine that the difference between the styles of both, made him put off writing the remnant chapter. For all we know, it might be the lack of inspiration! Knowing the reformer and the political mind Tikkanna is, it is highly unlikely that he would have given in to a superstition and left out the small part. In a lecture series on Virata Parvamu, Dr. Garikipati Narasimha Rao mentioned that Nannayya had in fact completed the second half of the Aranya Parva too and also opined that Tikkanna Somayaji was very well placed to complete the chapter if it was indeed left incomplete by Nannayya. This leaves us with a speculation that the second half of the chapter could have been destroyed in the period between the times of Tikkana and Yerrapragada. This seems possible as the region of Deccan went through a phase of invasions, plunder and destruction by the Sultanate hordes under General Malik Kafur.

About fifty years after Tikkanna, the remaining half of the Aranya Parva was taken up by Yerrapragada, or Yerrana. It is speculated that Yerrapragada existed between 1280 CE and 1364 CE. He was born to Pothamamba and Surana Kavi in Gudluru in Prakasam district. In his younger days, his poetical aptitude was appreciated by many, and some used to praise Yerrana for having acquired the style of Nannayya, and encouraged him to pursue a literary journey of his scale. Probably this did inspire Yerrana's taking up of the remnant chapter of Andhra Mahabharatamu.

## Historical Background

The Kakatiya dynasty came to an end with the invasion of Warangal by the Delhi Sultanate (Malik Kafur on behalf of Alauddin Khilji) and the subsequent capture of Pratapa Rudra. After the fall of the empire, the warlords who were previously serving in the Kakatiya army formed a confederation and prevented the consolidation of Turkish power in the Deccan region. The prominent names among them were Musunuri Kapayya Nayaka and Prolaya Vema Reddi.

Vema Reddi founded the Reddi Empire spanning Southern Andhra and part of Rayalaseema, with Addanki as his capital. Kapayya Nayaka took on the invaders mostly in the Telangana and Northern Andhra regions. Yerrapragada witnessed the tumultuous period of invasion, massacre and resistance in the later part of his life.

After consolidating power, Vema Reddi turned to patronizing poets and scholars while giving them liberal grants. According to Sanskrit scholar Dr. S Godavaribai, Yerrapragada was a great friend of Mallayya Reddi, the younger brother of Vema Reddi. In fact, Yerrapragada dedicated his earlier compositions, "Hari Vamsam" and "Ramayanam", to Prolaya Vema Reddi. Scholars opine that these compositions might have thrown more light on the contemporary social dynamics than Yerrana's part of Andhra Mahabharatamu (Aranya Parva).

### Yerrapragada's Literary Versatility

The Aranya Parva stands as an example of Yerrapragada's poetical versatility as well as his large heart. His contribution was sandwiched between the contributions of two path-breaking poets of the past, and that is a great challenge to any poet. He continued from where Adikavi Nannayya had left, mimicking his style to a level of inseparable precision. This part remained dedicated to Rajaraja Narendra, as Nannayya wanted it to be.

However, Yerrapragada's uniqueness was visible gradually, owing to his mastery over descriptive, creative and narrative aspects. The poetic style of this chapter, as scholars opine, undergoes a gradual transformation to an extent that the last poem perfectly blends into Tikkanna's style of poetry.

From a plot perspective, this part of Mahabharata has three turning points, which are the Ghoshayatra, the pardoning of Jayadrata, and the birth secret of Karna. This chapter is also the home of several philosophically dense discussions like the Yaksha Prasna, the Satya-Draupadi Samvada, and the episode of Savitri. While Nannayya's mastery was the Kavya and Shastra aspect, Yerrana's core strength was the style of Prabandha.

Prabandha is a literary genre that dwelt on a Puranic episode and expanded it riding on the emotional (Rasa) and Nataka (dramatization) aspects following specified conditions. (See [here](#) for a detailed critique of how Telugu Prabandha differs from Sanskrit Prabandha). Yerrana is also known

as “Prabandha Parameshwara” for his mastery over this genre. He, in fact, ushered in the age of Prabandhas, which reached its pinnacle during the rule of Sri Krishna Deva Raya of Vijayanagara. He was also known as “Shambhudasa”.

There were also minor script transformations in the Telugu language that took place in between the periods of Raja Raja Narendra and Prolaya Vemareddy. For instance, the letters ‘ka’ and ‘sha’ (I am not a linguist, but these two letters are definitely not among the uncommon words). Refer to the image below. The comparison is between the fifth row and the third row from the bottom.



Source for the picture : vijred.wordpress.com

The preservation and scripting of the epic during these 300 odd turbulent years is something to ponder about.

Yerrana’s other works include “Hari Vamsham”, “Ramayanam” and “Nrisimha Puranam”, where his full-blown Prabandha expertise is very much visible. According to another medieval poet Chintalapudi Ellana, Andhra Mahabharatamu is that “unique poetical jewel adorning the neck of Goddess Saraswati, where Nannayya made a part of the string and Tikkanna made the second”. Yerrapragada’s contribution glows as a gem-studded locket connecting both the ends. He might not have exaggerated!

References and further reading:

Andhra Mahabharatamu Vol 5, TTD edition  
Kavitrayamu by Nanduri Rama Krishnamacharya  
 Andhra Kavula Charitra by Kandukuri Veeresalingam Pantulu  
 Errayya teerchina Harivamsamu by Dr. S Godavari Bai

## Andhra Maha Bhagavatamu – Bammera Pothana

భాగవతము దెలిసి పలుకుట చిత్రంబు,  
శూలికైనఁ దమ్మిచూలికైన,  
విబుధజనుల వలన విన్నంత కన్నంత  
దెలియ వచ్చినంత దేటపఱతు.

**Reciting the Bhagavatam, being fully conscious of its intricacies is very tricky job to even the one who carries the (Tri) Shula (Lord Shiva) and also the one born out of lotus (Lord Brahma). I shall henceforth elucidate only what I could gather from listening to those knowledgeable people, (to the extent I could delve deep inside it, and to the extent I understood**

I would need to give a similar disclaimer as I write this essay to describe the poetical genius of Pothanmatya, the creator of Andhra Maha Bhagavatam. A single post can indeed do no justice in writing about the poet or his poetry. This version of Bhagavatam can highlight a lot of notable aspects about the poet.

It has been accepted that Pothana lived in the 14<sup>th</sup>/15<sup>th</sup> Centuries. He was a native of the village Bammera (in today's Warangal District). He is believed to be a Sahaja Kavi, the one who got to imbibe the skill of poetry by his own nature. With the above poem which served as a humble disclaimer, Pothanamatya also asserted his creative liberty in narrating the sequences of the Bhagavata Purana.

### Profession and lifestyle

The freedom he asserted about his literature can also be seen in the way he led his life. He stuck to the profession of farming, a lifestyle strikingly different from that of his peers who sought out the patronage of rulers. His literary predecessors like Adi Kavi Nannayya, Tikkana Somayaji, Srinatha, etc enjoyed the patronage of their contemporary rulers. Scholars opine that their works like Andhra Mahabharatam also reflected the life and greatness of the rulers who patronized them. I do not mean to belittle their greatness as for all we know; the rulers in those turbulent times did deserve



the accolades. Pothana himself has taken a lot of care to acknowledge the literary giants who served as his inspiration.

But while carving his own niche within the congregation of scholars, Pothana refused to dedicate to anyone else, his work other than Sri Rama who we understand is his *ishtadaiva* (though he belonged to a Shaivite family). He did not accept even a *dammidi* (~ 1 millicent of Ameican standards) as a token of patronage from anyone.

పలికెడిది భాగవత మఱు,  
పలికించెడివాడు రామభద్రుం డఱు, నేఱు  
బలికిన భవహర మగునఱు,  
పలికెద, వేఱొండు గాఢ బలుకఱు నేలా?

**Recite, I shall, this Bhagavatam. But the one who drives me to recite is none other than the Lord Ramabhadra. When my recital can destroy the materialistic mirages, why should I recite any other story?**

### Defying the rulers

Pothana put up a silent yet strong resistance to the advances of Sarvagna Singha Bhoopala, the local ruler who demanded that Pothana dedicate the work of Andhra Mahabagavatam to him. The poet is seen as asserting his freedom to not comply and explains his reasons in the beautiful poem

బాల రసాల సాల నవ పల్లవ కోమల కావ్య కన్యకన్  
గూళ్ల కిచ్చి యప్పడుపు కూడు భుజించుట కంటె సత్కవుల్  
హాలికు లైన నేమి గహనాంతర సీమల కందమూల కౌ  
ధాలికు లైన నేమి నిజ దార సుతోదర పోషణార్థమై

**For a Satkavi (Poet in pursuit of truth), it is better to remain a farmer or depend on the fruits and roots available in the forests to feed his family rather than dedicate his work which is like his own daughter of blooming youth to undeserving hands and eating out of the fruits of the unholy dedication.**

Was this an instance of Self-Publishing in those days? That is something to think about!

## Equality of Hari and Hara and importance of the female goddesses

Pothana was born in a family that followed *Veera Shaivism*. He however chose Rama as his *iShtaDaiva*. The balance is seen in his poetry where he describes Shiva. This is one characteristic contrary to conventional puranic recital where the deity of subject is depicted as the supreme and all others as subservient/inferior to him or her. The poem below is the very second poem of the epic where he praises Lord Shiva.

వాలిన భక్తి మొక్కెద నవారిత తాండవ కేళికిన్ దయా  
శాలికి శూలికిన్ శిఖరిజా ముఖ పద్మ మయూఖ మాలికిన్  
బాల శశాంక మౌళికిగ పాలికి మన్నధ గర్వ పర్వతో  
నూలికి నారదాది మునిముఖ్య మనస్సరసీరుహాలికిన్

With a devotion of surrender, I salute him who delights in uninterrupted dance, him who is full of compassion, him who wields the trident, him who is like the Sun that makes the lotus called face of the daughter of the mountains (Parvati) bloom, him who has adorned the quarter moon on his locks, him who wears a garland of skulls, him who has uprooted the tree of arrogance of cupid, him who delights in the lakes called the minds of sages like Narada etc



We encounter another heart-warming example in the 10th Skanda of the epic, where Lord Krishna is described as a toddler. The Sanskrit Bhagavatam in the same juncture, describes Shiva's

visit to have the Darshan of the delightful toddler god. Pothana, however departs from the episode and presents a poem visualizing the oneness between the two deities.

తనువున నంటిన ధరణీపరాగంబు; పూసిన నెఱిభూతి పూత గాఁగ;  
ముందల వెలుగొందు ముక్తాలలామంబు; తొగలసంగడికాని తునుక గాఁగ;  
ఫాలభాగంబుపైఁ బరగు కావిరిబొట్టు; క్రాముని గెల్చిన కన్ను గాఁగ;  
గంఠమాలికలోని ఘననీల రత్నంబు; క్రమనీయ మగు మెడకప్పు గాఁగ;

హారవల్లు లురగహారవల్లులు గాఁగ;  
బాలలీలఁ బ్రౌఢబాలకుండు  
శివుని పగిది నొప్పె శివునికిఁ దనకును  
వేఱులేమిఁ దెలుప వెలయునట్లు

The mud smeared on the child (Krishna) was, but the cover of ash of Shiva. The string of pearls which kept his lustrous curls in place was, but the crescent that adorned Shiva's head.

The mark of musk on Krishna's forehead was, but the very third eye that won over Kama. The sapphire studded neck jewel of Krishna was, but the serpents that adorned Shiva. Thus the all-knowing child in his games manifested as the very Shiva himself, to proclaim that the

**Hari and Hara are one and the same!**

Pothana's reverence to the Goddesses is no less. It can be seen in the way in which the chapter containing his opening prayer seems biased to the female goddesses at least in the number of poems. While he composes a poem each on Vishnu, Shiva, Brahma and Ganesha in order, he wrote four in praise of Saraswathi and one each in praise of Lakshmi and Durga. The poem he composed for Durga is replete with the love of a child to its mother. If I recollect correctly, this is the first poem I learnt from Andhra Maha Bhagavatam

అమ్మలఁ గన్నయమ్మ, ముగురమ్మలమూలపుటమ్మ, చాలఁ బె  
 ధమ్మ, సురారులమ్మ కడు పాఱడి వుచ్చిన యమ్మ, తన్ను లో  
 నమ్మిన వేల్పుటమ్మల మనమ్మల నుండెడి యమ్మ, దుర్గ, మా  
 యమ్మ, కృపాభి యిచ్చుత మహత్త్వకవిత్య పటుత్వ సంపదల్.

**She the mother of all the mothers, she the mother who is the very cause of existence of the three primordial mothers (Lakshmi, Saraswati and Parvati), She the supreme mother, she the destroyer of the evil, she the mother who resides in the hearts of all the deities who are worshipped, she the very ocean of grace, may the mother give me the prosperity of authority over composing poems of boundless greatness**

### Other literary aspects

My knowledge of the Andhra Mahabhagavatam is insufficient to analyse each and every aspect of the epic. But from my memory, the episode of “Gajendra moksham” stands out of the rest. The prayer of Gajendra to Vishnu starts with some amount of agnosticism trying to analyse the characteristics of the Supreme Being (Which I feel is jignaasa) and gradually progresses to the agonized call of the devotee in trouble (aarti). Notable aspect here is what Pothana writes about the response of Vishnu to this prayer.

సిరికిం జెప్పఁడు; శంఖ చక్ర యుగముం జేదోయి సంధింపఁ; డే  
 పరివారంబునుఁ జీరఁ డభ్రగపతిం బన్నింపఁ డాకర్షికాం  
 తఠ ధమ్మిల్లముఁ జక్క నొత్తఁడు; వివాదప్రోత్తితశ్రీకుచో  
 పరిచేలాంచలమైన వీడఁడు గజప్రాణావనోత్సాహియై.

**In his hurry to save the elephant king, he neither informed Lakshmi, nor did he take up the Shankha or the Chakra, nor did he call out to his retinue, nor did he summon the Garuda who is his vehicle, nor did he wait to set right the locks of hair that had scattered around his neck. He did not even let go the edge of Lakshmi’s garment which he had previously held in a playful mood (she eventually is forced to go behind him followed by the rest of his retinue and then the other gods and the rishis)**

There are multiple legends around this single poem. But it reflects the poet’s liberty to describe the eagerness of Lord Vishnu to save his devotees. Even today during informal conversations, we use this poem to tease someone who abruptly rushes out of a gathering without telling anyone about the reason.

The other episode which is dear to me is the one where gopikas complain about the mischiefs of child Krishna to Yashoda. As it was a lesson prescribed in my High school, I remember learning about the variety of vocabulary Pothana used to address a woman. Ambhojakshi (Lotus eyed), Vimalendu mukhi (one with the face like a spot less moon), Lathangi (One with a body as slender as a creeper), Manjula Vaani (The one with a soothing voice), Trilokaabhi Raama (One who delights the three worlds) are some of them. Needless to say we, the girls in our class spent that year using the same words to playfully address each other.

As I mentioned earlier a single post would fall way too short to describe the greatness of Pothanamatyia and his immortal work. I shall consider that the purpose of this article would be fulfilled if it is able to kindle the readers' interest to explore more about this poet whose poems are loved dearly by illiterates and scholars alike in the Telugu world. I shall end with a poem where he put to a beautiful use, the *Atishayokti alankaram* (Ornamentation of exaggeration) to describe a prayer of Bhishma

కుప్పించి యెగసినఁ గుండలంబుల కాంతి;  
 గగనభాగం బెల్లఁ గప్పికొనఁగ;  
 నుఱికిన నోర్వక యుదరంబులో నున్న;  
 జగముల వ్రేఁగున జగతి గదలఁ;  
 జక్రంబుఁ జేపట్టి చనుదెంచు రయమునఁ;  
 బైనున్న పచ్చనిపటము జాఱ;  
 నమ్మితి నాలావు నగుఁబాటు సేయక;  
 మన్నింపు మని క్రీడి మరలఁ దిగువఁ;

గరికి లంఘించు సింహంబుకరణి మెఱసి  
 నేఁడు భీష్మునిఁ జంపుదు నిన్నుఁ గాతు  
 విడువు మర్డున యనుచు మద్విశిఖ వృష్టిఁ  
 దెరలి చనుదెంచు దేవుండు దిక్కు నాకు

**He, the God is my refuge, the one who resisted the pleas of Arjuna who tried to restrain him in vain, the one whose ear rings emanated the light that filled up the skies as he leapt (from the chariot), the one at whose weight, the world quaked as he is the one who carries the entire bunches of universes in his stomach, the one who was unmindful of his upper garment, falling at the impact of raising his weapon**

A Very Special thanks to Sri V Sambasiva Rao garu for his precious inputs and transliteration of poems.

For further Reference:

<http://telugubhagavatam.org/>

Pothana Bhagavatam – TTD Edition

## Ramayanamu – Kummara Molla

Ramayana has always occupied a special place in the literary sphere of India. Translations and reconstructions happened over millennia with each version throwing a light on contemporary issues from the perspective of the epic.

When one remembers the Telugu versions of Ramayana, two of them one by Gona Budharaja (Reddi) of the Kakatiya period and the one by Atukuri Mollamamba stand out. Mollamamba reminds us of the extent of social reach of literature in her era (Vijayanagara period). Another Telugu poetess to receive equivalent acclaim by Western historians is Muddu Palani (author of Radhika Santvanam) who was in the Court of Tanjavur King, Raghunatha Nayaka.

### Life and Times

Mollamamba or Molla was the daughter of Kesana Setti who was a potter by profession. The name indicates that they belonged to the *Vjsya* community. Earlier historians placed her as a contemporary of Tikkana Somayaji during the times of Kakatiya Empire. But, Kandukuri Veeresalingam Pantulu in his 'Andhra Kavula Charitra' points out that she was a contemporary of Sri Krishna Deva Raya, disproving the earlier claims that she was the sister of Kummara Gurunatha who was the scribe of Tikkana Somayaji in translating Mahabharata. Her salutations to poets like Srinatha who lived in the periods between the Kakatiya and Vijayanagara empires point out that they predated her.

Molla mentions her family tree in the beginning of the epic. The absence of her mentioning about her husband or the marital family led to speculations that she was either unmarried, or a child widow who stayed at her father's place. Historians express their admiration over her breaking the glass ceiling of gender and caste in carving a niche of her own among the Telugu poetical sphere. But to those who are aware of the penetration of spread of literary aptitude during the rule of Sri Krishna Deva Raya would not find it as strange. A folklore existed which spoke about the guards of the king dismissing a poet saying every kid on the streets of the empire under the Rayas could compose poetry, Sri Krishna Deva Raya himself being an acclaimed scholar.

Mollamamba indirectly admits that her poetry was mostly self-taught. Unlike other poets, she does not acknowledge the guru who taught her literature, but says she could compose this by the grace of Sri Kantha Malleshwara, her family deity.

కావ్య సంపద క్రియలు నిఘంటువులును  
గ్రమము లేవియు నెరుగ గోప  
వరపు శ్రీ కంఠ మల్లేశు వరము చేత  
నేరి గవిత్యంబు చెప్పగా నేర్చుకొంటి

**I am unaware of the treasury of literature, the grammar, the vocabulary and the rules.  
But I have learnt the art of poetry only through the grace of Srikantha Malleswara, the deity  
of Gopavaram**

However, it might just be her humility that she denies knowledge of literature. But her ode to her literary predecessors contrasts her humble disclaimer. She has included Valmiki, Vyasa, Bharavi, Magha, Bhavabhuti, Bana Bhatta, Siva Bhadra (I came to know of him only through her poem), Kalidasa, Bheema Kavi, Nannayya and Srinatha. While it is understandable that a commoner would know about Valmiki and Vyasa, Molla's mention of Bharavi, BhavaBhuti, Magha and the likes does show her acquaintance with scholarly works which were not that popular with commoners.



Statue of Mollamamba at Tankbund, Hyderabad

## Style of Poetry

Mollamamba expressed her reluctance towards excessive usage of Sanskrit vocabulary unlike her literary predecessors. In one of the poems, she says that it would not make sense to use scholarly



words of Sanskrit while translating an epic already written in Sanskrit as it would appeal only to the scholars thereby, defeating the very purpose of translation

తేనెసోక నోరు తీయన యగు రీతి  
తోడనర్థమెల్ల తోచకుండ  
గూఢ శబ్దములను గూర్చిన కావ్యంబు  
మూగ చెవిటి వారి ముచ్చటగును

**The tongue retains the sweetness only after tasting of honey. The epic should be written only in understandable language. Usage of incomprehensible vocabulary with hidden meanings would be as bad as reciting in front of the deaf and dumb.**

Though her narration of the epic Ramayana was largely in Telugu, we come across a generous usage of Sanskrit in poems that praise Sri Rama like the one below

సల్లలిత ప్రతాప గుణ సాగరుడై విలసిల్లి ధాత్రి పై  
బల్లిదుడైన రామ నరపాలకుని స్తుతి సేయ జిహ్వాకు  
జిల్లర రాజ లోకమును జేకొని మెచ్చగ నిచ్చు పుట్టునే  
నల్లము బెల్లముం దినుచు నప్పటికప్పటి కాస సేయునే

**The tongue which has realized the delight in praising the exploits of the peerless King Rama of a sea of admirable qualities will not delight in praising the lesser kings. It is the same way in which the same tongue would not prefer a piece of ginger for jaggery**

More than a third of the vocabulary used in the above poem has Sanskrit words. This contradicts Mollamamba's reluctance to use Sanskrit words while translating the epic into Telugu. One way the historians can reconcile to this contradiction is by dwelling into prevailing form of Telugu that was in vogue during her times. It could have been possible that even the common spoken language of Telugu was deeply intertwined with Sanskrit in her surroundings.

Kandukuri Veeresalingam extols her style of poetry as no less than scholarly while using vernacular vocabulary ensuring a free flow of the narration while balancing it with rhythmical melody that suited the poetry of those times.

The below poem describes the princes and Kings who ruled the Kingdom of Koshala in the chapter of Balakanda. One can observe that the word Raju (King) appears in multiple contexts ending up with varied meanings.

రాజులు కాంతియందు రతి రాజులు రూపమునందు వాహినీ  
 రాజులు దానమందు మృగరాజులు విక్రమ కేళియందు గో  
 రాజులు భోగమందు దినరాజులు సంతత తేజమందు రా  
 రాజులు మానమందు నగరంబున రాకుమారులందరున్

**They are like the kings of night (moon) in radiance, like Kings of Love (Cupid) in appearance, like kings of sea in charity, like kings of jungle (Lion) in valour, like the kings of cattle (Bull) in appetite, King of Day (Sun) in wealth of posterity, Kings of Kings (Emperors) in reputation and like princes while in the city.**

This could be one derived usage of an alankara (Ornamentation in poetical sense) called Laataanuprasa which indulges in using the same word with same meaning but in different contextual sense.

Her narration of Ramayana is crisp and is roughly 900 verse long. Mollamamba has excised a significant amount of liberty in her narrative and has not religiously stuck to Valmiki's narrative. She has condensed the extensive descriptions of the flora and fauna that Valmiki has indulged in his original version and has focussed only on the plot. Other episodes overlooked in Molla's Ramayana are the Lakshmana Rekha episode (which is absent even in Valmiki's version as it was only a creation of Tulsidas in Rama Charita Manas), Uttara Ramayana or the story after the Pattabhisheka of Rama, dialogue between Jabali and Rama and some of the sub plots. She has taken the liberty of attributing Rama's lament and rage after Sita's abduction to Lakshmana. It was her strong belief that Rama was an embodiment of poise and that he would not resort to violent swearing as depicted by Valmiki.

Kandukuri Veeresalingam speaks about minor grammatical violations in Mollamamba's poetry. Some scholars opine that she had a narrative style closer to spoken dialect which did overlook certain grammatical constraints. There are others who feel that most of the so called errors are just typographical as Mollamamba was not known to engage a professional scribe like the eminent poets of her period who enjoyed royal patronage.

But critics and admirers have admitted that her style of poetry captured the rhythmic vocabulary which makes it pleasurable as well as easier for a common reader to read, memorize and remember the poems.

Academics have strongly felt over and again that Mollamamba epitomizes women's education, liberty and progress and parts of her work have been included in School curricula as a part of Telugu Language. As an enthusiast, I would wish every Telugu speaking person to read through her Ramayana and enjoy the melodious rhythm that would continue to linger, just like the taste of honey would linger on one's tongue.



కందర్ప రూప! ఖండిత  
కందర్పవిరోధి చాప! కరుణాదీప్తా!  
వందిత శుభనామా! ముని  
సందోహ స్తుత్య భూమ! జానకి రామ !

**Rama, the beloved of Janaki! The one with the form of Kamadeva, the one who broke the bow of the 'enemy of Kamadeva' (Shiva)! The very source of grace! The one with the revered auspicious name! The one eulogised by the countless sages!**

**References and further reading:**

Molla Ramayanam

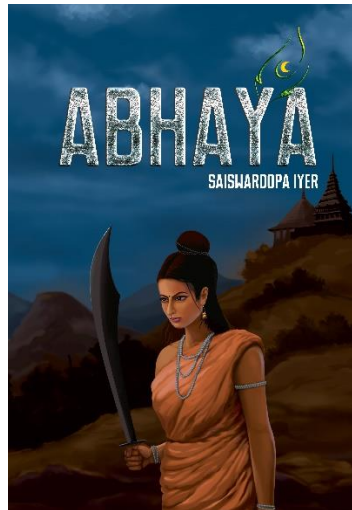
Andhra Kavula Charitra by Sri Kandukuri Veeresalingam

## About the author

Saiswaroopa Iyer is an IITian and investment professional turned author. Her interests include Indian history, epics, philosophy and literature. Trained in Carnatic Classical Music, she was also awarded a gold medal by Tirumala Tirupati Devasthanams for rendering Annamacharya kritis. Her debut work of Puranic fiction Abhaya is a reconstruction of the episode of Narakasura vadha from Bhagavatam. The soft version is available on Amazon. She is currently working on her next novel "The First Queen" based on an ancient Vedic legend.

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