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## Describing the New in Old Style: Technological Modernity and Natural Imagery in A. R. Rājarājavarma's *Āṅgalasāmrājya*

David PIERDOMINICI LEÃO

**Abstract:** The paper focusses on the analysis of selected samples from *sarga* XX of the *Āṅgalasāmrājya*, a *mahākāvya* composed by A. R. Rājarājavarma in 1897. These portions are centred on a description of the first passenger train introduced in India in 1853, during the regency of Lord Dalhousie (1812–1860). These eight stanzas of the *Āṅgalasāmrājya*, apart from appearing to be the first testimony in Sanskrit literature to reference a train, seem to be particularly relevant on account of their natural imagery, which interacts at different levels with the poetic depiction of modernity and technology offered in the *mahākāvya*.

**Keywords:** A. R. Rājarājavarma, Sanskrit *mahākāvya*, modern Sanskrit literature, Lord Dalhousie, East India Company, technology, locomotive

David PIERDOMINICI LEÃO, Jagiellonian University in Cracow, Poland;  
david.pierdominici@gmail.com;  0000-0002-6725-3219



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## Biographical overview

Within the galaxy of Indian writers in Sanskrit and Malayalam active at the end of the 19th century, a relevant place is occupied by A. R. Rājarājavarma Koyittanpurān (1863–1918), one of the most important poets during the so-called “Golden Age” of Keralan literature.<sup>1</sup> The author was born into the Parappanāt royal family of Cañnanāśśēri (Kottayam district), in the Lakṣmīpuram family palace (*koṭṭāram*). The poet’s father was Vasudevan Nanpūtiri, a renowned and acclaimed Vedic scholar, while his mother, Kuñcikkāvu Tampurāṭṭi, was the maternal cousin of Kēraḷavarma Valiya Koyittanpurān (1845–1914), an author in Malayalam and Sanskrit and one of the great figures in the literary and cultural life of 19th-century Kerala.<sup>2</sup>

The first years of Rājarājavarma’s life were marked by significant changes: after internal turmoil in the royal family, some members moved to Kārttikappalli (approximately 20 miles from Cañnanāśśēri); then, once again, to Harippāṭ with Kēraḷavarma and the rest of the family. The new abode, gained through the aid and intervention of the *rāja* of Travancore, was baptised Anantapuram palace: here Rājarājavarma spent his childhood with his mother and learned uncle.

The future poet’s Sanskrit education started under the instructions of Kēraḷavarma, while he was under house-arrest in Harippāṭ due to political intrigues and machinations that deteriorated relations between the author and his patron, the *mahārāja* of Travancore Āyilyam Tirunāl Bālarāmavarma (1832–1880). Rājarājavarma spent six formative years (1875–1881) in training under his uncle; during this time, the young boy displayed talent and imaginative genius that would bring him fame later in life.

When Viśākhram Tirunāl Rāmavarma (1837–1885) succeeded his brother Āyilyam in 1880, Kēraḷavarma was immediately released from house-arrest and moved to Trivandrum, becoming a much closer associate of the new ruler. The uncle brought with him his brilliant nephew, who started to attend regular courses of study at the local high school from 1881 onwards, with particular attention to his pursuing of Malayalam and Sanskrit studies.

<sup>1</sup> In Malayalam, the suffix *-varma* and the titles Koyil and Tanpurān are applied to individuals connected to the notion of royalty and the *kṣatriyavarṇa*. The definition of “Golden Age” was coined in reference to the specific timeframe of Malayalam literature covering the years 1850–1950 (GEORGE 1991: 10–11).

<sup>2</sup> The summary of the biographical vicissitude of Rājarājavarma is based on GEORGE (1991: 13–31). Kēraḷavarma Valiya Koyittanpurān is remembered for the composition of several works in Sanskrit, such as the *Viśākhaviḷaya* (1883), the *Kṣamāpaṇasahasra* (1878), and the *Yamaṇāmasāta* (1875–1880?), all equally important for their revolutionary impact and for the strong connection to their author’s biographical vicissitudes. The interested reader may refer to the concise introduction on Kēraḷavarma’s life and works – which are beyond the scope of the present paper – in RAMAKRISHNA PILLAI (2005: 1–15).

The first poetical compositions in Sanskrit are dated to his university years, such as the *Bhaṅgavilāpa*, written around 1886 after failing a Chemistry exam for his B.A. degree, or the *Vimānāṣṭaka*, about the launch of an air balloon and composed after his M.A. exams.<sup>3</sup> Together with the first poetic trials in Sanskrit, Rājarājavarma started to contribute articles in his native language, Sanskrit, and in English to several periodicals in Malayalam under the suggestion of Kēraḷavarma. Despite the aid and support provided by his uncle and the *mahārāja*, which could have secured him an easy and wealthy life, the author instead entered the Government service in Trivandrum. He was firstly appointed as head of the recently founded *samskr̥tapāṭhaśālā* in 1890, and in 1894, he became the head of the Sanskrit College (GEORGE 1991: 21–22). At this institution, Rājarājavarma devoted his efforts to develop the status of the school and improve the curricular proposal. He was later appointed as the Superintendent of the Vernacular Studies at the Mahārāja's College in 1899, which gave him the possibility of strengthening the role of Malayalam and language studies, reforming the syllabi, and composing books on different subjects (grammar, prosody, poetics) to implement such curricula and the study of the native language of Kerala. In 1910, Rājarājavarma was appointed to the first professorship of Sanskrit and Dravidian Languages in Trivandrum, a position that he would occupy until the end of his life in 1918 (GEORGE 1991: 26–29). In this later period are dated some of his most important works: the *Laghupāṇinīya* (1911–1913, in two parts), a *vyākaraṇa* treatise expounding in a simplified way the rules of Sanskrit, Malayalam translations of Kālidāsa's *Abhijñānaśākuntala* and *Mālavikāgnimitra*, vernacular adaptations of several plays by Bhāsa, and the monumental grammar of Malayalam, the *Kēraḷapāṇinīya* (1896; revised edition in 1917).<sup>4</sup>

### “The British Empire”

Among the creative works in Sanskrit by Rājarājavarma a prominent position is occupied by the *Āṅgalasāmrājya*, a *mahākāvya* in 23 *sargas*, composed between 1897 and 1900 and published in 1901 in Trivandrum.<sup>5</sup> This poem, the

<sup>3</sup> GEORGE (1991: 18, 20); such works will be later collected in the poetic anthology titled *Sāhityakutūhala*, a collection of fourteen minor works on different subjects published in Trivandrum in 1904 (see SUBRAMANIAN 2008: 35–45).

<sup>4</sup> For an overview of Rājarājavarma's grammatical works, please refer to GEORGE (1991: 34–43), for his Malayalam translations of Sanskrit works, see GEORGE (1991: 44–48), and, lastly, for his creative compositions in Sanskrit and Malayalam, see GEORGE (1991: 49–53). For a more detailed account of the *Laghupāṇinīya*, useful information can be obtained from SUBRAMANIAN (2008: 64–88); for Rājarājavarma's contributions to Sanskrit literature in general, with a complete list of his works, see SUBRAMANIAN (2008: 35–58). A complete and updated record of the author's Sanskrit works can be also found in EASWARAN NAMPOOTHIRY (1972: 86–88).

<sup>5</sup> The first edition of the *mahākāvya* was published at the Bhaskar Press together with the gloss (*tippanī*) authored by Gaṇapati Śāstrī (1860–1926), the Sanskrit scholar editor of the renowned *Trivandrum Sanskrit Series* and discoverer of Bhāsa's plays.

title of which can be literally translated as “The British Empire”, was composed under the advice and encouragement of Kēraḷavarma for the celebration of the Diamond Jubilee of Queen Victoria (1819–1901) in 1897. In fact, in the preface to the first edition of the *Āṅgalasāmrājya*, Rājarājavarma commented thus on the genesis of the poem:

[T]he Angala Samrajya owes its birth to the enthusiasm I felt at the general rejoicing of the Diamond Jubilee, which transported me all of a sudden to the haunts of the Muse.

(SUBRAMANIAN 2008: 122)

As the title itself suggests, the *mahākāvya* is a historical work that recounts the establishment of British power in India, the creation of the East India Company (1600–1874), and the ascendancy of Queen Victoria as Empress of India through the Government of India Act 1858, which enabled the Crown to assume direct control of the Indian territories in the form of the British Raj (1858–1947).<sup>6</sup>

Rājarājavarma modelled the *Āṅgalasāmrājya* on the ancient tradition of the *mahākāvya* genre, structured upon purely encomiastic intent; in order to thus gain the favour of the British elites, the poet resorted to the employment of the Sanskrit language, the canonical eulogistic vehicle for the political and historical celebration. In previously quoted preface to the *Āṅgalasāmrājya*, the author explicitly justified this intentional choice for his work:

Moreover, none of the Indian vernaculars is expected to be understood – far less appreciated – outside India, while Sanskrit on its philological value has secured scholars throughout the civilized worlds.

(SUBRAMANIAN 2008: 122)

Nevertheless, the retelling of the British presence in the subcontinent passed in silence; in fact, there is no available evidence suggesting that foreign circles ever paid attention to the poem or that it reached England anyway. On the other hand, Rājarājavarma’s aim provoked the disappointment of Indian cultural elites, who showed resentment for the *Āṅgalasāmrājya*’s one-sided version of historical facts and its employment of Sanskrit to narrate the British domination over the country (CIELAS 2020: 184). In fact, despite having modelled his work on the pre-existing *mahākāvya* tradition, the poet based his poem exclusively on foreign accounts for the factual history, such as the *History of British India*

<sup>6</sup> The *Āṅgalasāmrājya* was not the first Sanskrit work dealing with the British domination over India; in fact, the first poetical composition on the subject seems to be the anonymous *Itihāsatamomaṇi*, dated to 1813. This work was followed by several texts dealing with the same topic, as the *Vijayinīkāvyā* by Śrīśvara Vidyālaṃkāra Bhaṭṭācārya (on the theme of Queen Victoria’s life and the British rule in India), the *Victoriacaritrasaṃgraha* by Kēraḷavarma, and the *Gārgidevacaritra* of Padmanābha on the life of King George V (1865–1936), to quote only a few (SUBRAMANIAN 2008: 119–121).

by William Wilson Hunter, *Essays on Lord Clive and Warren Hastings* by Lord Macaulay, *A Bird's-Eye View of Picturesque India* by Richard Temple, and, lastly, the *History of the Nineteenth Century* by Mackenzie (SUBRAMANIAN 2008: 124).

### **Style and audience of the *Āṅgalasāmrājya*: divergence from the *mahākāvya* model**

Despite having structured his *Āṅgalasāmrājya* on the *mahākāvya* model, the work does not perfectly mirror the *dictamina* of the genre. The thematic content of the poem, purely historical and celebrative, did not allow Rājarājavarma to strictly adhere to the necessary requirements for a *sargabandha/mahākāvya*, as those theorised, for instance, by Daṇḍin's *Kāvyaḍarśa* (I, 14–19), or remembered in modern times by Siegfried LIENHARD (1984: 162). In this sense, included subjects such as *ṛtu* (“season description”), *ratotsava* and *vipralamba* (“love elements”), *vivāha* (“marriage”) or *kumārodaya* (“birth of a son”) are absent in the *Āṅgalasāmrājya*. In other respects, the poem measures up to the standards of the *mahākāvya*; it is enough to take into account the considerable metrical variability (nearly 30 metres) and the abundant presence of different figures of speech (*artha-śabdālaṃkāras*).<sup>7</sup>

In a way, the *Āṅgalasāmrājya* represents then a “new” kind of *mahākāvya*, both in terms of its structure and its divergence from the traditional motifs, as recalled above. Nevertheless, the most important aspect of the poem that illuminated its novelty and the gap from the previous tradition is related to the notion of patronage. As the *mahākāvya* genre has exemplified since the first attestations, the composition of such literary texts was intrinsically bound to the idea and institution of patronage, where often a royal figure (or a notable individual still related to the court) sponsored a poet, who, in exchange for maintenance and support, composed an eulogistic work extolling the glories of the patron and his lineage. As the ancient Indian literary tradition showed, the dynamic of patronage also involved a different scenario than the one mentioned above. The poets, wandering from court to court, often composed works for possible patrons in order to gain protection and economic stability, or, in some cases, offered also pre-existing compositions. As stated above, Rājarājavarma's work met its genesis during the celebration of Queen Victoria's Jubilee in 1897, following the specific advice of Kēraḷavarma. It appears that the *mahākāvya* narrating the establishment of the British dominion over India was completely detached from the ancient notion of patronage. It would be tempting to assume that Rājarājavarma composed the *Āṅgalasāmrājya* in order to gain a favourable position and ingratiate the British circles; unfortunately, there is no available

<sup>7</sup> SUBRAMANIAN (2008: 148–152).

data nor direct testimony to fully support such a conclusion at the present state of research. Nevertheless, such a supposition could be still advanced here.

As a relevant last point, the composition of the *Āṅgalasāmrājya* was much more motivated and dictated by the poet's strong educational background in English<sup>8</sup> and, as a member of a Keralan royal family, presumably by close contacts with foreign administrative elites and circles, rather than by a courtly or external commission.

### Lord Dalhousie and the first passenger train in India

One of the most interesting sections of the *Āṅgalasāmrājya* is the twentieth canto, entitled *Dalahausivilāsa*, “The Sports of Dalhousie”.<sup>9</sup> This specific *sarga* is centred on the administrative regency of the Scottish statesman and colonial administrator Lord Dalhousie, James Broun-Ramsay, 1st Marquess of Dalhousie (1812–1860), who served as Governor-General of India between 1848 and 1856. Dalhousie was acknowledged to be one of the most efficient rulers of British India, a moderniser who carried out several social and political reforms to improve the conditions of the occupied territories.<sup>10</sup> Despite bringing development and progress to India, the Governor-General ruled with authoritarianism; such harsh policies as the “doctrine of lapse”<sup>11</sup> partly contributed to the growing sense of

<sup>8</sup> During his formative years at Harippāt, Rājarājavarma was tutored by his versatile and learned uncle Kēraḷavarma, who instructed his nephew in Mathematics, History, and also English, the hegemonic linguistic vehicle imposed during the 19th century by the new elites, somehow in opposition to Sanskrit, the cultural carrier of Indian national identity (CIELAS 2020: 179). Together with Malayalam and the traditional course in Sanskrit, English, as an embodiment of Western literature, occupied a relevant place in Rājarājavarma's artistic career and personal life. For instance, in 1898, the poet translated Shakespeare's *Othello* into Sanskrit under the title of *Uddālacarita* (included in the anthology *Sāhityakutūhala*). Such literary experiment was justified by the poet “as an exercise for the English reading student to whom Sanskrit is fast growing to be more alien than a foreign tongue, and partly as a means of a tongue conveying to the mind of the orthodox Pandit some idea of the marvellous creative imagination of the Western Poet” (SASTRAL 1925: 1). The influence of English literature over Rājarājavarma is clearly exemplified by this statement of Subramanian: “Shakespeare was a passion, Fraued was a love, Lord Macaulay was an appetite, Walter Scott and Thackeray were enchantments to him” (SUBRAMANIAN 2008: 27).

<sup>9</sup> For a detailed outline on the contents of each canto of the *Āṅgalasāmrājya*, refer to SUBRAMANIAN (2008: 126–137).

<sup>10</sup> Concerning the social policy carried on by Dalhousie refer to GHOSH (1975).

<sup>11</sup> The “doctrine of lapse” constituted a policy of annexation initiated by Dalhousie for the Indian princely states and applied until 1858. According to the doctrine, any state under the suzerainty of the East India Company would have its royal status abolished and annexed into British India, if the ruler was either considered incompetent or died without a male heir. By applying such a policy, the Company took over the princely states of Satara (1848), Jaitpur, Sambalpur (1849), Baghat (1850), Udaipur (1852), Jhansi (1854), Nagpur (1854), Tanjore and Arcot (1855). Consult ARNOLD (1865: 106–203) for an approximate coeval historical account

discontent in the Indian society, which, as is known, burst during the so-called “Sepoy Mutiny” of 1857.

Dalhousie also increased the frontiers of the British domains through military conquests, such as those conducted against the Sikh kingdom, concluded with the subjugation of Punjab at the closing of the Second Anglo-Sikh War (1848–1849),<sup>12</sup> and against Burma during the Second Anglo-Burmese War (1852–1853). This last campaign reached its climax with the conquest of the Pegu region, pushing the boundaries of the Dalhousie’s conquest outside the proper Indian territories. After the escalation of tension between the government of Rangoon and the British shipping interests (officially since the treaty of Yandaboo in 1826), Dalhousie sought any excuse to extend its influence over Burma and invade the country, with the involuntary aid of parliament, which, supporting this cause, was purposely misinformed by the Governor-General. Starting from April 1852, Burma offered very weak resistance, first renouncing to Martaban (5th April), then losing Pegu (officially annexed in December) and Prome during the second campaign in October of the same year.

Aside from the military expansion and the aggressive policy of annexation, Lord Dalhousie is especially remembered for his educational and social reforms, aimed at improving Indian infrastructure. For instance, the Governor-General developed the status of roads and bridges and improved water reserves with the creation of the “Ganges Canal”.<sup>13</sup> Further important achievements are represented by the revolutionary introduction of the telegraph and postal systems<sup>14</sup>

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of Dalhousie’s policy of annexation and LEE-WARNER (1904: vol. II, 145–181) on the same issue. Some of the above-mentioned historical annexations find mention in *Āṅgalasāmrājya* XX, 48–50.

<sup>12</sup> BUIST (1849; consult sections IV–VII); LEE-WARNER (1904: vol. I, 233–269). The Second Anglo-Sikh War is narrated in *sarga* XIX of the *Āṅgalasāmrājya*, and in the first stanzas of the following one (XX, 1–6). Rājarājavarma mentioned in verse 2 the *mahārāja* Duleep Singh (1838–1893), the last ruler of the Sikh Empire, son of Ranjit Singh (1780–1839), and Jind Kaur, the *rāni* who held the kingdom from 1843 to 1847. After their defeat at the closing of the war, Duleep Singh was deposed and exiled to England at the age of 15; here, he was nicknamed “the Black Prince of Perthshire” and became an intimate friend of Queen Victoria.

<sup>13</sup> The “Ganges Canal” was created under Dalhousie’s instruction in order to irrigate the Doab region between the Ganges and Yamuna rivers, after the Agra famine in 1837–1838. This substantial project not only favoured the agricultural assets of India, but increased the population percentage around the irrigated areas. Reforms were planned to protect the lower strata of local society, but they were never executed; this lack of implementation resulted in the fact that the population was kept poor and tied to agricultural activities promoting bonded labour. Constructed between the 1842–1854, this system consists of a main canal of 272 miles and about 4,000 miles of distribution channels. The canal system irrigated nearly 9,000 km<sup>2</sup> of agricultural land in ten districts of Uttar Pradesh and Uttarakhand. Rājarājavarma alluded to the creation of this irrigation plan in *Āṅgalasāmrājya* XX, 29–30.

<sup>14</sup> The introduction of the mail service and the telegraph is narrated in *Āṅgalasāmrājya* XX, 22–27. For a detailed analysis of the latter’s impact in India please refer to GORMAN (1971). For

and the completion of the first link of railway communication in India in 1855.

Particularly relevant for our purposes is the poetic description of the passenger train drawn by Rājarājavarma in *Āṅgalasāmrājya* XX, 12–20. A depiction of such technological advancement in a Sanskrit *mahākāvya* may sound surprising, but by the latter half of the 19th century and the following decades, a steam locomotive running on tracks in India did not constitute a novelty. As observed by Hurd and Kerr, a discussion on the desirability of railed steamed locomotion in the subcontinent began to circle around 1830, while a systematic construction of the railway system in India began only around 1850.<sup>15</sup> Such a necessity of a network of railway connection for the East India Company was initially dictated by administrative, colonial, and economic interests, such as the transportation of military regiments,<sup>16</sup> as clearly justified in a monumental memorandum (more than 200 pages-long) composed by Lord Dalhousie himself, an excerpt of which was reported by Hurd and Kerr as follows:

“Immeasurable” advantages, wrote Dalhousie, would accrue to a colonial administration composed of a “comparative handful” of British administrators and soldiers scattered over the subcontinent. Railways would enable Britain “to bring the main bulk of its military strength to bear upon any given point in as many days as it would now require months, and to an extent which at present is physically impossible”.

(HURD and KERR 2012: 9)

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instance, Rājarājavarma refers to the telegraph as *ninadavāhakanantri* (“the wire that carries [news] with humming”) in XX, 25; see for instance, the general description of the telegraph system in the same *sarga* of the *Āṅgalasāmrājya*:

*api ca tāḥ kila tantrya ihāstṛtāḥ prabalavaidyutaśaktijuṣo hi yāḥ |*  
*kṣaṇalavena nayanti vidūrataś caritam īritam īśad ṛte śramāt || 24 ||*

And even that wire-post which conveys in an instant and without the least effort despatched news from distant places by means of the powerful electric power (*prabalavaidyutaśakti*) was indeed spread here.

As the excerpt may show, such Sanskrit neologisms as *ninadavāhakanantri* embody a considerable degree of artificiality, as a mirror at literary and conceptual levels the issues encountered by modern authors in conveying new ideas which were obviously absent in the Sanskrit literary and linguistic background.

<sup>15</sup> HURD and KERR (2012: 1). Such a discussion in the British administration began not long after the pioneering construction by the mechanical engineer George Stephenson (1781–1848) of the first steam locomotive carrying passengers, *Locomotion no.1*, in 1825, or the launch of a more developed vehicle, the renowned *Rocket*, inaugurated in 1829.

<sup>16</sup> References to the transport of military units by train are also scattered in Lord Dalhousie’s private correspondence. To quote an excerpt of a missive: “Therefore what was before us was this. Between 29th April and 10th June to collect carriage for the siege-train, to march it 250 miles with an army to take Mooltan, to put down a rebellion, and to get across the rivers on our way back again” (Government House, May 10th, 1848; BAIRD 1910: 26).

The object of poetic description in the *Āṅgalasāmrājya* concerns in fact the official opening of the first railway in India, on 16 April 1853. On the newly constructed line connecting Bombay and Thane, the first passenger train, hauled by three locomotives<sup>17</sup> baptised Sahib, Sultan and Sindh, and composed of thirteen carriages, ran from Victoria Terminus (now Shivaji Terminus) for an approximate distance of 21 miles, carrying 400 passengers.

The inauguration ceremony was welcomed by general applause and admiration for the steam train, and the inaugural report dated 18 April 1853 and published in *The Times of India* spoke in such celebrative terms:

The 16th of April 1853 was, and would long continue to be one of the most memorable days, if not the most memorable day, in the annals of British India. This was not the triumph of nation over nation, of race over race, of man over his fellow human. It was the triumph of mind of matter, of patience and perseverance.

(TIMES OF INDIA 2013)

### The description of the locomotive in the *Āṅgalasāmrājya*

To this epochal event, Rājārājavarma devoted eight stanzas of his *mahākāvya* (XX, 12–20), which contain his poetic description of the steam locomotive in the general frame of Dalhousie's achievements. The impact of such depiction is revolutionary, given that, to the best of my knowledge, the *Āṅgalasāmrājya* seems to be one of the first – if not the first – Sanskrit texts containing a reference and description of the train, an emblem of the technological advancement of the Industrial Revolution.<sup>18</sup> Given also the thematic content of the poem – and especially of *sarga* XX – the elements of modernity, as emblems of the progress brought to the subcontinent, constitute an unavoidable presence in the retelling of the British dominion in India. Furthermore, the presence of such elements of technology in the *Āṅgalasāmrājya* contribute to enlighten the characters of

<sup>17</sup> It seems plausible that the first steam locomotives were employed during the construction of the “Ganges Canal” to transport materials and workers (HURD and KERR 2012: 2, note 2).

<sup>18</sup> Given the approximate chronological vicinity between the introduction of the first system of steam locomotion in India (1853) and the date of the *Āṅgalasāmrājya* (1901), the above statement seems plausible, even though other sources may contain a reference to the train. Later on, the locomotive often became an object of description, especially in the *muktaka* (“independent stanzas”) anthologies. For instance, a description of a railway carriage (*relasakati*) is found in a stanza (no. 5) from the section *navayugavīthī* (“picture-gallery from the modern era”) of the *Sāhityavaibhava* (1930) by Mañjukavi, also known as Bhaṭṭa Mathurānātha Śāstrī (Bhatt Mathuranath Shastri; 1889–1964), the renowned scholar, poet, grammarian and Tantra expert from Jaipur. See ŚĀSTRĪ (1930). Lastly, scattered references to the locomotive are found in Kṣamā Rava's (Kshama Rao) *Śaṅkarajīvanākhyāna* (RAVA 1939), as, for example, in XIII, 14, where the authoress mentioned the *dhūmayāna* (“steam vehicle”), the general term used through the work.

novelty of the *mahākāvya* itself, and its rupture with the previous tradition, where the notion of modernity was totally absent. As stated by Saurabh Dube in a handbook entry,

[A] crucial characteristic of dominant descriptions of the modern and modernity has hinged on their positing of the phenomena as marked by a break with the past, a rupture with tradition, and a surpassing of the medieval.

(DUBE 2016)

*In nuce*, aside from the matter of the patronage, the poem by Rājarājavarma distanced itself from the traditional notion of Sanskrit *mahākāvya* also due to the appearance of such motifs as the extended descriptions of the locomotive, telegraph and postal system. These contents, a surpassing addition to the thematic repertoire of the *mahākāvya* genre, underline the novelty of the asset of the *Āṅgalasāmrājya* as a “modern poem”, enriched with descriptions of actual glimpses from the modern world, rather with just stereotypical and compulsory elements theorised by the native Indian literary criticism.

On a second note, Rājarājavarma’s description appears to be particularly relevant on account of being interspersed with natural imagery that interacts at different levels and ways with the depiction of modernity and technology.<sup>19</sup> The poet began this specific passage with a general stanza intended to introduce the argument; below is the first verse depicting the steam locomotive:<sup>20</sup>

*sa kila vāhanatallaja ujjvalajvalananunna ihāsya niyogataḥ |*  
*prathamataḥ pracacāra sarasvatā samaruto maruto 'py adhiko jave || 12 ||*

According to his [Lord Dalhousie’s] order, that excellent means of transportation, pushed by a blazing fire, faster even than the wind and resounding as the sea, came here [to India] for the first time.

As a preliminary observation, the first of the eight stanzas does not directly employ a specific term for the passenger train, such as *agnīśakata* (literally “fire-waggon”, the Sanskrit compound coined by Rājarājavarma and found elsewhere in the poem), but instead refers to it through periphrasis in general terms.<sup>21</sup> The poet introduces in fact the locomotive as *vāhanatallaja*, “excellent

<sup>19</sup> On account of his thematic content, the *Āṅgalasāmrājya* offers little scope for description of nature; nevertheless Rājarājavarma has occasionally inserted such depictions in different *sargas*, such as the description of dawn in canto XIV, 34–39 (SUBRAMANIAN 2008: 144).

<sup>20</sup> Here and later on, I refer to the Sanskrit text of the *Āṅgalasāmrājya* according to the edition with the Malayalam commentary of Īśvaran Nanpūtiri (RĀJARĀJAVARMA 1997); if not otherwise stated, all the translations are mine.

<sup>21</sup> Another term referring to the train is *agniyāna*, “the one that moves [thanks to] the fire”, or “fire-carriage/waggon”, as in *Āṅgalasāmrājya* I, 8.

vehicle”, which is further coordinated with the compound *ujjvalajvalananunna*, “pushed/moved by a blazing fire”, obviously conveying the specification for the general *vāhana*. Moreover, in stanza 12, we notice the first juxtaposition between the mechanical and the natural elements: the train is said to be “faster than the wind” (*maruto 'py adhiko jave*) and “resounding as the sea” (*sarasvatā samaruto*). The verse presents somehow both the equalisation and the superiority of the technological domain over the natural world, represented respectively by the train itself and the sea and wind.

In the following stanza, Rājarājavarma presents the benefits deriving from travelling on the train, stating that a passenger does not have to worry about the number (and weight) of the luggage, nor about the length of the way, as those would be a real concern while travelling by normal means, as on a cart, for instance. This observation is linked to the second juxtaposition between the train and the natural imagery: this stanza from the *Āṅgalasāmrājya* explicitly states that travelling by train spares the animals the fatigue and pain of pulling a cart loaded with passengers:

*hayamukhasya paśor na kadarthanā na vahanīyapadārtthavicāraṇā |*  
*na ca punar gaṇanā patha āyater jagati yo gatiyogyatamo mataḥ || 13 ||*

There is no torment for the animal as the horse, no discussion about the weight of the things to be carried and, again, no counting of the length of the road; this is considered the most suitable [vehicle] in the world for travelling.

As an introductory point, the notion of the train facilitating the journeys and shortening the distances is present also in a later *mahākāvya* published in 1930, the *Śrīrāmavarmavijaya* by the Keralan poet Kuñṅan Vāriyar (1872–1942), which narrates the biography of the *rāja* of Cochin Rāmavarma XV (1895–1914). *Sarga* VI is focussed on the sovereign’s journey to Delhi to attend the imperial Durbar of 1903, organised by the Viceroy Lord Curzon (1859–1925) to celebrate the crowning of the King of England Edward VII (1841–1910) as Emperor of India (1901–1910). Kuñṅan Vāriyar, before narrating this historical event, briefly presented a description of the locomotive; one of the train’s advantages is thus introduced:<sup>22</sup>

*etāvadaṃbugahanāhitadīrghayātrāgamyā diśas tricaturais sugamā*  
*muhūrtaiḥ |*  
*āsann ihoti sakalair anubhūtapurvān kleśān vicintya sutarāṃ sukham*  
*anvabhāvi || VI, 15 ||*

[Although] the journey is perceived as long and dangerous, because of water depths and such, the distances are easily reachable in few moments

<sup>22</sup> I refer to the text of the *Śrīrāmavarmavijaya* according to KUÑṅAN VĀRIYAR (1930: 101).

(lit. “three or four”); reaching the destination, and having reflected upon the afflictions previously experienced by all people (because of the old ways of travelling), happiness was felt more deeply.<sup>23</sup>

Commenting upon the content of the stanza from the *Āṅgalasāmrājya*, in the words of Rājarājavarma, taking the train as a means of transportation spares the animals yoked to a vehicle the *kadarthanā*, “torture, trouble, distress”. The statement emphasizes, in fact, the profitability of such technological advancement, and the substitution with the animals (horses, and so on) that would otherwise be employed and subservient to the human needs and experience great pain. The stanza hints at the considerable advantages of technology represented by the train in the modern world, which can substitute traditional and sometimes nefarious ways of travelling, subtly alluding to the notion of *ahiṃsā*, “non-violence”, and respect for all living beings.

In the next verse, the poet further elaborates on the reference to creatures yoked to a vehicle, but with a completely different tone; if in the previous passage the train could spare suffering to the working animals, in stanza 14 the locomotive ridicules the chariot of the god Indra:

*pathiṣu yah khalu yantraniyantritaḥ kuśalayanṭṛniyantryagatiṃ hareḥ |  
ratham anekakayugyam ayugyabhāg vihasatīha satīrthya iṣor jave || 14 ||*

In this world, [the train], a companion<sup>24</sup> of the arrow for velocity, possessing no yoked animals and restricted indeed on the paths by an engine, laughs at the chariot of Indra, which is yoked to one thousand [horses] and the movement of which is governed by a dexterous charioteer.

The stanza is structured on the paradoxical contraposition between the train and *hareḥ ratham*, “Indra’s chariot”. Rājarājavarma conceived such an association skilfully employing contrastive imagery that plays on the recurrence of terms deriving from the same semantic area placed in an openly opposite association. More specifically, the train is characterised in the verse as *ayugyabhāg* (“endowed with no yokes”), a compound that relates in a divergent dynamic to the specification of Indra’s chariot, *anekakayugyam* (“yoked to one thousand [horses]”),<sup>25</sup> and,

<sup>23</sup> On this point (and others, as we shall see), the *Śrīrāmavarmavijaya* shows close similarity to Rājarājavarma’s description of the passenger train. Taking into account the same provenance of the two authors, it is not implausible to suppose a direct influence of the *Āṅgalasāmrājya*’s description of the steam train on Kuññan Vāriyar’s own account.

<sup>24</sup> The term *satīrthya* (equal to *satīrtha*) is registered in MONIER-WILLIAMS (2005: 1138) as “‘having the same teacher’, a fellow-(religious) student”. I have opted for the more general rendering “companion” to convey the idea of the similarity in speed between the train and the arrow in this passage of the *Āṅgalasāmrājya*.

<sup>25</sup> The reference to Indra’s chariot being harnessed to one thousand horses is perhaps reminiscent of Kālidāsa’s *Raghuvamśa* XII, 103d: *ūrdhvaṃ ratham harisahasrayujam nināya* (“[the charioteer] led up [to heaven] the high chariot to which were harnessed one thousand

further, as *yantraniyantritaḥ* (“restricted / controlled by an engine”), which is opposed to the attribution for the divine cart, *kuśalayantrṇiyantryagatiṃ* (“movement [of which] is controlled by a dexterous charioteer”). Such a literary and descriptive opposition was indeed achieved by Rājarājavarma through the refined play between derivatives from the *dhatus yuj-* and *yantr-* (some in negative forms) placed in a manifestly contrastive position. Being endowed with an engine (*yantra*), the train’s movements are simply regulated by this, while Indra’s vehicle needs the ability of a *sūta*. In similar way, the poet instituted a further contrast between the two objects of description, the train, which is free from yokes, and the chariot, to which numberless horses are yoked. In stanza 14, due to the characteristics applied to the locomotive as opposed to those for the chariot of Indra, the train, the *satīrthya iṣor jave*, “a companion of the arrow for velocity”, mocks (*vihasati*) the divine chariot itself.

Stanza 15 does not contain any direct comparison or juxtaposition between the train and the natural world. Nevertheless, in this verse Rājarājavarma introduced further considerations concerning the merit and advantages of the locomotive, similarly to what was stated in stanza 13. In this passage, the author compared the train to the cart of the gods (*devaratha*): if only those engaged in ascetic and meritorious practices can ascend to the latter, the former is accessible to everyone, emphasising in this way the universal reach of technology:

*sukṛtipūruṣamātranīṣevyatām prathayatā sulabhasya samam nṛṇām |*  
*jagati yasya saheta janaḥ katham sumanasām anasā saha tolanām || 15 ||*

How would people tolerate a similarity between the cart of the gods, which allows only those of virtuous conduct engaged in *mantras*, and this [the train], which is equally accessible to all the people in the world?

The notion of the accessibility of the train seems to be a detail that is remembered and further elaborated in modern Sanskrit literature. For instance, a passage from the previously mentioned stanza on the *relaśakaṭī* by Mathurānātha Śāstrī emphasised a similar aspect, even though much more caste-oriented; the railway carriage, in fact, *nānājātilokānekapaṅktau samāveśayantī* (5c), “comprises many groups of people from different castes”. Despite the fact that Mañjukavi referred to the accessibility of the train for people from different social strata, the notion seems to be anyway in line with the concept expressed previously in the *Āṅgalasāmrājya*, where the technology had universal access. Similarly, the *Śrīrāmavarmavijaya* reiterates the very concept of the universal accessibility of technology as follows:

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horses”; text according to NANDARGIKAR 1971: 394). As specified in MONIER-WILLIAMS (2005: 1289), the term *hari* (occurring in this quotation from the *Raghuvamśa*) is explicitly used in connection to Indra’s horses. In my translation of this passage, taking into account the usual imagery of Indra’s chariot harnessed to one thousand horses, I rendered *anekaka* (“numberless”), the first member of the compound *anekaka-yugya*, as “one thousand”.

*nānāmatān vividhaveṣadharāṃś ca martyo nā bālavṛddham  
 akhilārthayutān abhedam |  
 bhūloka eva nu vahann adhunaivam āyāty etāṃ matīm ca sudhiyām  
 adadhād ratho 'yam || VI, 14 ||*

(KUÑÑAN VĀRIYAR 1930: 101)

This train – and not the Earth – carrying people of diverse attire and various beliefs, connected with all walks of life, without distinction between children and the elderly, arrives thus now in the world and brings forth this belief of the wise.

The following stanza of *sarga* XX of the *Āṅgalasāmrajya* introduces a different approach in the description of the relation between the mechanical and natural domains. The content of the verse in question is not structured on the comparison or opposition, but on a proper interaction between the two different contexts. Rājarājavarma sketched in this passage a colourful and dynamic scene; the author depicts the train in full movement, running in proximity of a mountain: as soon as the speed of the locomotive increases – as does the covered distance – the mountain, despite being large, gradually withers in the eyes of the passengers that are looking outside the window. Such a description conveys the sense of a multidimensional scene, endowed with perspective and dynamicity:

*yam adhiruhya mudā caratām nṛṇām pathi dṛśoḥ sahasābhipatan puraḥ |  
 kṣitibhṛd apy alaghur laghu pṛṣṭhabhāk syadavaśād avaśātanam [em.;  
 avaśādanam ed.]<sup>26</sup> aśnute || 16 ||*

The mountain withers<sup>27</sup> due to speed, having a short extension, though big itself, as it disappears from the sight range of people who, having boarded [the train], travel on it with joy.

This very image of the mountain disappearing from the sight range of passengers due to the train's speed is again very similarly reiterated in the *Śrīrāmavarmavijayamahākāvya*. In a passage from the already mentioned canto VI, Kuññan Vāriyar portrayed Rāmavarma XV travelling to Bombay on his train; as Rāmavarma XV observed the scenery from the waggon, the mountains seemed to recede due to the high speed of the locomotive:

*tāvat svavāhanarayātiśayāt sudūradhāvat samastanagaśailakulām  
 ivovartīm |  
 paśyan nivāsanilayodaradrśyacitrabhaṃgīś ca so 'yam anayan kṣaṇavad  
 dināni || VI, 34 ||*

(KUÑÑAN VĀRIYAR 1930: 103)

<sup>26</sup> *Avaśādanam* represents the reading in the edition (ed.), while the acronym “em.” marks my correction in the text.

<sup>27</sup> Literally “gains withering”.

Meanwhile, this one [Rāmavarma XV], observing the complete multitude of mountains [as] if receding far into the distance due to the high speed of his own vehicle [i.e., the train], and having beheld the varied scenic sights from the interior of [his] compartment [lit. “abode”], spent the days like in a moment.

Stanza 17 of the *Āṅgalasāmrājya*, once again devoid of any direct reference to nature, contains an interesting case of wordplay aimed at explaining a name of the locomotive, *śatāṅgatā*, “the one with one hundred limbs/parts”:

*rathaghaṭāghaṭitātmakatāvaśāt prakāṭitāṅgaśatena śatāṅgatā |  
jagati yena paraṃ sphuṭam arthavaty adhigatā dhig atādr̥ṣi  
tatprathām || 17 ||*

Truly suitable in this world is [the name of] ‘the one with one hundred limbs’, acquired by this [the train], which has one hundred parts displayed, on account of being connected to an assemblage of waggons. Alas, [but] the extension of that [the chariot] is not like this!

This whole stanza is structured through the contrast between *śatāṅgatā*, applied to the train, and, implicitly, *śatāṅga*, “chariot”, a reference perhaps evoked by the presence of the term *ratha* as the first member of the first compound. The locomotive is characterised by Rājarājavarma as “having one hundred parts” due to the long series of waggons connected to each other, while one of the usual names of the chariot, *śatāṅga* (lit. “one hundred limbed”), seems inappropriate, given that the cart does not have one hundred parts as the train, even when it is tied to horses. This contrast, exemplified by the remark that the appellative *śatāṅgatā* could relate only to the train, justifies the concluding exclamatory remark of the poet.

At the end of this “etymological” consideration, Rājarājavarma re-employed once again the natural imagery in his poetic description of the steam locomotive. More than the other verses, in which the technological element of modernity was juxtaposed or placed in contrast to the natural world, in stanza 18 the two contexts are seemingly submerging into each other through an identification. The poet described here the movement of the train and its waggons around a mountain flank; the vehicle is, in fact, conceived in comparison with a flock of cranes (*bisakaṇṭhikās*) flying in circle and resembling a garland of clouds in the sky (*jaladamālini khe*). As the verse reads, the close juxtaposition resulting almost in an identification between the two polarities of the imaginative description is emphasised by the finite verbal construction and its object, *tulanām vahati*, “[it] conveys equalness with”:

*jaladamālini khe bisakaṅṭhikāpaṭalagum̐bhityā tulanām srajā |  
pathiṣu parvatapārśvacaṣeṣu yo vahati saṃhatisaṃbhṛta cārimā || 18 ||*

This [vehicle], which is gracefully brought together by the junction [of the waggons] through paths running on the mountain flanks, bears equalness with the circle of the flock of small cranes arranged<sup>28</sup> in the sky as a garland of clouds.

A further simile is present in the next verse as well: the locomotive, due to the great number of passengers and luggage in the various waggons, is compared to a moving bazaar filled with people and goods:

*vividhabhāṇḍajanākulam ullaṣadgrhakulam pracalantam ivāpaṇam |  
ka iha viṣmayate sma na mānavo matirayaṃ tirayantam udīkṣya  
taṃ || 19 ||*

What man in the world has not marvelled, having looked at this [the train] that obscures the speed of the mind, like a market moving with a multitude of dazzling compartments and filled with people and goods of different kind?

In this stanza, introducing the train as an object of *viṣmaya*, “wonder, awe”, Rājarājavarma described the locomotive as the vehicle that “obscures the swiftness of the [human] mind” (*matirayaṃ tirayantam*), an attribution that paradoxically conveys the speed of the steam train. If in verse 12 it surpassed “even the wind for rapidity” (*maruto ’py adhiko jave*), here the locomotive is hyperbolically conceived as outmatching even the rapidity of thoughts. Additionally, as stated above, the poet compared the *agniśakaṭa* to an *āpaṇa*, “market, shop”, populated by people selling and purchasing goods. This conceptual simile aids in conveying a completely natural scene, bringing together the abstract and mechanical with the natural world and the everyday life.

The concluding stanza of the locomotive sequence presents once again a dynamic sketch, in a way similar to the multidimensional verse examined before (16). Here, Rājarājavarma portrayed the passengers standing on the platform waiting for the train, which approaches provoking the jubilee of the people, compared finally to “rain-cuckoos”:

*niyatakālacareṣu nirīkṣiteṣv api tadīyaraṭheṣu vidūrataḥ |  
pathi janāḥ pratipālya cirāt sthitā mumudire mudireṣv iva cātakāḥ || 20 ||*

<sup>28</sup> In this stanza the passive past participle *gumbhita* occurs, but it is not attested; more than probably, it should be read as *gumphita*, “tied, strung together, arranged” (MONIER-WILLIAMS 2005: 359). Perhaps the “variant” could be simply justified as a case of sonorization of a voiceless consonant, typical of Southern writers.

As the wagons of the train were observed even from a distance arriving at a certain time, the people on the road, who stood having waited a long time, rejoiced, like rain cuckoos [take pleasure] in the clouds.

The arrival of the locomotive after a long wait arouses the joy of the passengers; the people and their pleasure are compared to *cātaka* birds (presumably *Clamator jacobinus*), which, in the standard *kāvya* imagery, are said to live only on water drops falling from the rainy sky. As a famous stanza from Kālidāsa's *Meghadūta* reads:<sup>29</sup>

*ambhobindugrahaṇacaturāṃś cātakān vīkṣamāṇāḥ*  
*śreṇībhūtāḥ pariḡaṇanayā nirḍisanto balākāḥ |*  
*tvām āsādyā stanitasamayē māṇayīṣyanti siddhāḥ*  
*soṭkampāni priyasahacarīsaṃbhramāliṅgitāni || I.22 ||*

The Siddhas looking at the *Chātakas* skilled in catching the drops of rain-water, and pointing out the female cranes formed into lines by counting them one by one, will highly respect (welcome) you on getting, at the time of your thunder, the eager and hasty embraces from their beloved consorts.

## Concluding remarks

Among the copious Sanskrit production marking the end of the 19th and the beginning of the 20th centuries, the *Āṅgalasāmrājya* is one of the most fascinating examples. The interest for this literary work could be justified by several factors: first and more immediately, the *mahākāvya* offers a detailed panoramic account of the rise of the British dominion over the subcontinent, starting from the establishment of the East India Company in 1600 and concluding with the proclamation of Queen Victoria as Empress of India. Furthermore, the accountable and proper historical content of the *Āṅgalasāmrājya*, even though presented in a poetic way, marks the epic composed by Rājarājavarma as one of the first truly historical works in Sanskrit in the annals of early modern India and modern Sanskrit literature.

As we have seen, the thematic content of the *mahākāvya*, modelled on that previous indigenous tradition, showed a considerable degree of difference compared to its antecedents in the genre, as the poem, due to its poetic content, inevitably introduced elements of modernity and, as in the case of the train description, of technological advancement. As we have stated previously, Rājarājavarma's poem embodies further innovative elements that distance it from the ancient tradition – not only in thematic and structural terms but also by being completely detached from the traditional idea of patronage, which

<sup>29</sup> I quote the text of the *Meghadūta* according to KALE (1947); translation after KALE (1947: 5).

served as the ideological justification for composing such literary works as *mahākāvya*s. These characteristics warrant further inquiry and the development of an avenue of research on this epic poem.

Stanzas 12–20 of the twentieth canto of the *Āṅgalasāmrājya* contain what presumably is the first description of a steam locomotive in any Sanskrit text. Moreover, as we have tried to advance in the present paper, such depiction of the passenger train in Rājarājavarma's *mahākāvya*, marking a landmark in the history of the modern Sanskrit literature, presumably became a source of inspiration and a model for several subsequent literary works.

The poetical conceptualisation of such modern novelty was structured by Rājarājavarma through recurring references to the most immediate and important basis for comparison and poetic virtuosity in Sanskrit literature, the natural world and its imagery. In the relevant section of the *mahākāvya*, as we have seen, the interaction between the mechanical and natural worlds in these eight stanzas operates on many different levels. In the description of the *agniśakaṭa* and in the poet's literary plan, such divergent domains interact through dynamics that can be summarised as follows: superiority/convenience of technological development over the natural world, interaction/juxtaposition, and finally almost complete identification, as we have emphasised in the previous section of the article.

The use of standard *kāvya* poetic resources and the basis for comparisons drawn from the natural realm obviously do not constitute novelty; the presence of these comparisons and metaphors built in the natural domain was, after all, an essential and recurring requirement of classical production in Sanskrit, and, moreover, of the *mahākāvya* genre's traditional *dictamina*. However, in the *Āṅgalasāmrājya*, a literary work which, due to its contents, offers little scope for natural descriptions, this poetic domain seems to assume a different role in the general plan of the train depiction. The novelty represented by the first steam locomotive in India was treated in the epic with the usual and well-established poetic elements of the classical *kāvya* production in Sanskrit. We may venture to state that in stanzas 12–20 of *sarga* XX of the *Āṅgalasāmrājya* Rājarājavarma did not coincidentally resort to conventional natural imagery for the depiction of the locomotive in his *mahākāvya*. For this section, the natural world poetically became the most immediate and indispensable guiding tool not only for the description of modernity and its disconcerting technological advancement, but also for its visualisation, comprehension, and poetical fruition. In offering the description of the locomotive, such an epochal novelty that marked the progress and the mechanical development in India, Rājarājavarma, in his imaginative account based on an interface between modernity and nature, could not but resort to known poetical images to guide his readers in this poetic journey across

the bewildering changes of the modern world: *vayu*, *sarasvat*, *bisakanṭhikās*, and *cātakas*.

## Funding

This paper is a result of the project “How hard can a dead heart beat? Reflections on Modern Sanskrit Literature” (OPUS 22; registration number 2021/43/B/HS2/02046), financed by the National Science Centre, Poland.

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