

Ancient Poets of Rajanna Sircilla District in Telangan - A Study

Dr. Sandeveni Thirupathi¹, Kundarapu Sathish²

¹Contract Lecturer in History, SRR Sanskrit Degree Kalashala, Vemulawada

²Part-time Lecturer in History, SLNSA Degree Kalashala, Dharamapuri

Abstract:

Rajanna Sircilla district of Telangana holds a distinguished place in India's literary history as a trilingual cradle of Kannada, Sanskrit, and Telugu literature. Under the patronage of the Chalukyas of Vemulawada, the region witnessed a flourishing of literary and religious traditions, particularly Jainism. The Chalukya era, often considered the golden age of Kannada, produced seminal figures like Mahakavi Pampa, a pioneer of Kannada *Maha Kavya*, and his brother Jinavallabha, who composed the earliest Telugu *kanda* verses. Their contributions not only influenced the development of regional literature but also laid the groundwork for Telugu's eventual recognition as a classical language. Sanskrit literature also thrived here, notably through Jain monk and philosopher Somadeva Suri, who composed the *Yashastilaka Champu Kavya* and *Neeti Vakyamritam*. These works offer unparalleled insights into early medieval Indian culture, ethics, and Jain philosophical discourse. The rulers themselves were scholars and ardent patrons of arts and learning, attracting poets and thinkers from across the subcontinent. Inscriptions from this period bear witness to a literary culture that transcended regional boundaries, showcasing the district's role in shaping India's intellectual and artistic heritage. The Chalukyas' embrace of religious pluralism and linguistic diversity highlights their inclusive vision, making Rajanna Sircilla a beacon of early multilingual literary evolution and Jain scholarship in the Deccan.

Keywords: Jain Literature, Mahakavi Pampa, Jinavallabha, Somadeva Suri. Kannada-Telugu-Sanskrit Trilingualism, Telangana literary history, Chalukyas of Vemulawada,

Introduction:

A scrutiny of literary history of Rajanna Sircilla district reveals that this land is not only a cradle of movements and revolutions but also the birthplace of inspiring and joyful literature. Traces of other languages too can be found here alongside the Telugu language. The district is a home to the people who contributed to those languages and the texts they authored. During the reign of the Chalukyas of Vemulawada, who ruled this region, Kannada, Sanskrit, and Telugu flourished. The district served as a birthplace for Kannada and Telugu, and also as a field of innovation for Sanskrit literature. The official languages of the Chalukyas were Kannada and Sanskrit, while Telugu was a common spoken language among the populace. Occasionally, prose and poetic works in Telugu also emerged. Their inscriptions feature all three languages Kannada, Sanskrit, and Telugu. The period of the Chalukyas is referred to as the Golden Age of Kannada. Many great Kannada poets were nurtured in this land. Moreover, this district is the birthplace of the first Sanskrit *Champu Kavya*, authored by the great poet Somadeva Suri.

The first known Telugu, *kanda* poem, which played a key role in achieving classical status to Telugu, also originated here. Thus, Rajanna Sircilla stands as a glorious beacon of remarkable literary evolution.

Sircilla Part of the Vemulawada Chalukyas’:

During the time when the Rashtrakutas ruled southern India, the Telangana kingdom emerged and dissolved with the Chalukyas of Vemulawada, who played a crucial role in the Rashtrakuta victories. Initially, they ruled from Potana or Bodhan as their capital over a region called Sapadalaksha.¹ Later, they shifted their capital to Vemulawada, situated on the banks of the Mulavagu (river), and became historically known as the Chalukyas of Vemulawada.² The first ruler of this dynasty was Vinayaditya Yuddhamalla, who came to power in 750 CE, marking the beginning of their rule. They were eleven rulers who governed for 223 years. Among them, Arikesari II was the most prominent, and Arikesari III was the last.³ These kings extended their rule beyond north-western Telangana. The Chalukyas of Vemulawada were renowned not only for their military campaigns but also for preserving religion and culture. While encouraging the construction of temples, monasteries, and *Basadis*, they also promoted literary growth. The kings themselves were scholars, poets, and learned individuals, which fostered their deep affection for literature. Arikesari I and Arikesari III were especially adept in grammar and literary subjects. They patronised numerous poets, scholars, teachers, and Vedic priests. Among these were the distinguished poets Pampa, Jinavallabha, and the great Sanskrit poet Somadeva Suri.

Mahakavi Pampa:

Pampa was the foremost of the trinity of gems of Kannada literature, the other two being Ranna and Ponna. Pampa, the earliest Kannada poet,⁴ was the court poet and general under Arikesari II (939-950 CE). He composed *Adipurana* in Kannada, narrating the story of Rishabhanatha, the first Tirthankara of Jainism. The work consists of sixteen chapters describing the five auspicious events in Rishabhanatha's life. Pampa completed this work at the age of 39, likely in 941 CE using Jinasena's Sanskrit *Purva Purana* as the basis and claimed to have finished *Adipurana* in three months. Despite its literary brilliance, Dr. Kolluru Suryanarayana opines that it did not gain widespread popularity due to its religious content leaving no scope for creativity.⁵ His next work, *Vikramarjuna Vijaya*, was the first *Mahakavya* in Kannada, consisting of 14 chapters and 1,706 verses. Though titled *Vikramarjuna Vijaya*, it was essentially the first Kannada *Bharata*, drawing inspiration from the Sanskrit *Mahabharata*. Pampa equated his patron Arikesari II with Arjuna of the Pandavas. Notably, no Telugu *Mahabharata* was written until a hundred years after Pampa's. Scholars like Dr. Nayani Krishnakumari and Dr. Ramachandra Rao believe that without Pampa's work, the Telugu *Mahabharata* might not have come into being. Some scholars even suggest that Nannaya, the first Telugu poet, had Pampa in mind and drew parallels with him while composing the *Bharata*. The similarity between Pampa's *Bharata* and Nannaya's *Bharata* is so striking that Puttaparthi Narayanacharya wondered whether both were written by the same person. Nidadavolu Venkatarao pointed out that some verses in Nannaya's work mirror the style of Pampa's *Adipurana*. Thus, Pampa's Kannada *Bharata* served as an inspiration for Telugu *Bharata*.⁶

Some scholars, including Nidadavolu Venkatarao, have proposed that Pampa and the Telugu poet Padmakavi, who authored *Jinendra Purana*, are the same person. This idea was supported by Tirumala Ramachandra, Challa Radhakrishna Sharma, and Divakarla Venkatavadhani. Timmappayya tried to prove this in his work *Nadoja Pampa*. However, Korlapati Sriramamurti and Dr. Kolluru Suryanarayana

rejected this claim, citing the absence of the original manuscript. They argued that without solid evidence, attributing *Jinendra Purana* to Pampa is not justified. Veturi Prabhakara Shastri, in his *Prabandha Ratnavali*, opined that the verses related to *Jinendra Purana* found in *Prabandha Ratnakaram* of Peddapati Jagannadha Kavi are not ancient enough. Whether or not he wrote in Telugu, Pampa was certainly of Telugu origin. But no Telugu works have been directly attributed to him.⁷ Dr. Kolluru Suryanarayana argued that if Pampa had indeed written in Telugu, he wouldn't have used a pseudonym like Padmakavi.⁸

The Chalukyas of Vemulawada honored and supported this great poet. Arikesari II was so pleased with the *Vikramarjuna Vijaya* that he granted Pampa the *Agrahara* of Dharmapura. Additional details about his family come from the trilingual inscription found at Kurikyala (*Bommamma Gutta*). Some historians believe the inscription was composed by Pampa's brother, Jinavallabha, while others argue it was Pampa himself. According to the inscription, Pampa was a Kamme Brahmin of the Srivatsa gotra, born in Vangiparru village of Venginadu. His father was Bhimapayya and mother Vabbanabba. However, the genealogies in *Vikramarjuna Vijaya* and the *Bommamma Gutta* inscription differ. According to *Vikramarjuna Vijaya*, Madhava Somayaji, Abhimana Chandra, Komaraiah, and Abhimana Devaraya were his ancestors, while the *Bommamma Gutta* inscription states that Abhimana Chandra, Jyotisha Singana, were the forefathers and Bheema and Vabbanabba the parents of both Pampa and Jinavallabha. Nelaturi Venkata Ramanaiah suggested that Vabbanabba may have been Pampa's stepmother, and Jinavallabha his half-brother, hence their omission in his literary works. Pampa's grandfather was a Vedic scholar (Somayaji), while his father converted to Jainism. The family might have likely moved to Vemulawada during his father's time. The inscription mentions Rishabha and Vardhamana, the first and the last *Tirthankaras*, as their family deities, affirming their Jain faith.⁹

Pampa was also known as a disciple of Jayangonda Siddhanta Bhatt of Pottagabali sect and Kondakunda lineage, belonging to Pandarangapalli. He was highly skilled in all arts, a scholar of music, and was praised with titles like *Kavitagunaarnava* (Ocean of Poetic Virtue) and *Sakala Kala Praveena* (Master of All Arts). He was also a master poet capable of skilfully employing the rules of prosody.¹⁰

In his final years, Pampa adopted monastic life according to Jain tradition and is believed to have attained *samadhi* at Bodhan in present-day Nizamabad district. However, the inscription at his supposed *samadhi* names the person as Shubhanandi. Researcher Sitaram Jagirdar suggested that Shubhanandi and Pampa were the same, as Jain and Hindu ascetics often adopt new names upon renunciation. Since his Guru was Jayanandi, Pampa may have taken the name Shubhanandi. Bodhan was already a renowned *Digambara* Jain centre, once ruled by Bahubali, son of Rishabhanatha. It is believed that Bharata installed Bahubali's statue there. Since Bodhan was part of the Chalukyan kingdom, it is plausible that Pampa lived and attained *samadhi* there.¹¹ Thus, the wandering grounds of Pampa, the pioneer of Kannada poetry and Jain monasticism, lie in Rajanna Sircilla district.

Jinavallabha:

He was the brother of Pampa and a scholar-poet in his own right. Proficient in Kannada, Telugu, and Sanskrit, Jinavallabha was a devout Jain and an esteemed teacher. He established the *Tribhuvana Tilaka Basadi* near Gangadhara, where he taught philosophy, martial arts, and religious doctrine. He inscribed an eleven-line epigraph on a sacred stone at Kurikyala Hill (Vrishabhadri), now known as the *Bommamma Gutta* inscription. The inscription begins in Sanskrit, continues in Kannada, and ends in Telugu. It has been dated to 945 CE and contains six Kannada verses and three Telugu *kanda* verses,

predating Nannaya, the first Telugu poet, by a century. This confirms that Telangana has long nurtured the Telugu language. Hence, Jinavallabha achieved mastery over the language and penned the first *kanda* verses in Telugu. He is considered one of the earliest Telugu poets. The erstwhile undivided Andhra Pradesh government used this inscription as primary evidence while seeking classical status for Telugu language. The inscription, likely composed in Vemulawada and finalised there before its engraving, played a crucial role in earning Telugu its classical recognition.

Jinavallabha is also credited with composing three Sanskrit verses found in the Kurikyala inscription and is believed to have authored the Sanskrit *Mahavira Swami Stotram*.¹² The inscription also mentions a poet named Malliya Rechana, who wrote the metrical treatise *Kavijanaashraya* in Telugu under Jinavallabha's patronage, yet another indication that literary creation in Telugu predated Nannaya in this region.¹³

Mahakavi Somadeva Suri:

Belonging to the lineage of illustrious Sanskrit poets like Ashvaghosha, Kalidasa, Bana, and Bhasa, Somadeva Suri was a renowned Jain monk, philosopher, and Sanskrit scholar. He authored *Yashastilaka Champu Kavya*, a work that earned him eternal fame and established his name in classical Sanskrit literature. It is considered one of the earliest examples of the *Champu* style, combining prose and poetry. The depth of philosophical discourse in this work revealed Somadeva Suri's brilliance as a thinker and poet.¹⁴

Somadeva Suri completed the composition of the *Yashastilaka Champu Kavya* in 959 CE on *Siddharthi Chaitra Madana Trayodashi*, during the reign of Vagaraja (955–963 CE), the elder son of the Vemulawada Chalukya king Arikesari II. At the time, Vagaraja was ruling with Gangadhara as his capital and had joined the imperial Rashtrakuta ruler Krishna Vallabha on southern military expeditions. Somadeva Suri claims to have completed the work during a halt at Melpadi in Chittoor district.¹⁵ The work is also known by another title *Yashodhara Maharaja Charita*, narrating the tale of King Yashodhara of Ujjayini across eight captivating cantos. The prose sections are enriched with lively dialogues, while the poetic sections exhibit rich sound embellishments. Although the text prioritises Jain philosophical doctrines, teachings, legends, and beliefs, it is remarkable in that it draws comparisons with other religious traditions and delves into the roots of all major faiths. Scholars assert that there is no other literary work that offers such a complete and vivid portrayal of early medieval Indian culture, encompassing historical, geographical, political, social, religious, and cultural insights of that era. It helps fill critical gaps in the understanding of Indian medieval history.¹⁶

Somadeva Suri also authored the *Neeti Vakyamritam*, another Sanskrit work, comprising 32 chapters and 1,550 aphorisms. These maxims, written in simple Sanskrit and laced with elegant proverbs, focus on public welfare. The text extensively discusses interpersonal behaviour within families and among individuals with diverse temperaments. In essence, it covers every aspect of human behaviour. It also includes guidance on statecraft. Renowned historian A.S. Altekar opines that it can be compared to the ancient treatise *Arthashastra* by Kautilya. Furthermore, Somadeva Suri translated *Brihatkatha*, originally written by Gunadhya during the Satavahana period, into Sanskrit as *Kathasaritsagara*. Other known works include *Shannavati Prakarana*, *Mahendra-Matali Jalpa*, *Yukti Chintamani Sutra* or *Yukti Chintamani Stava*, and *Syadvadopanishad*.¹⁷

Historians believe that Somadeva Suri was born around 920 CE in Bengal. A Copper Plate inscription from Parbhani dated to 966 CE references him as belonging to the Gauda community (Bengal). In his

Yashashtilaka he claims Nemideva, a disciple of Jain teacher Yashodeva of Karnataka region, as his Guru. Before reaching the Deccan, he served at the court of the Pratihara (Gurjara) king Mahendrapala II, rulers of Gujarat. Later, he moved to the Vemulawada Chalukya kingdom. This tradition of Jain monks and scholars migrating from north to south India has existed since the Mauryan era.¹⁸

By the time Somadeva Suri arrived in the Deccan, the Rashtrakutas and their vassals, the Chalukyas of Vemulawada, had shown strong patronage toward Jainism. They actively supported Jain poets and philosophers. During their reign, towns such as Bodhan, Vemulawada, Kolanupaka, Gangadhara, Korutla, and Repaka emerged as prominent Jain centres. Especially notable was the *Tribhuvana Tilaka Basadi* at Gangadhara, which flourished as a major educational institution. This Basadi had already been established as a Jain learning centre in the south. Scholars such as Pamapana, Jina Vallabha, Vadibha Simha, Vadibha Chudamani, Peddana Bhattu, and Malliya Rechana are said to have resided here. Alongside spiritual studies, training in various religious philosophies, military strategy, and weaponry was imparted. The Vemulawada Chalukya rulers provided resources for the upkeep of this institution. At the invitation of Arikesari II and driven by a desire to deepen his understanding of *Digambara* Jain philosophy, Somadeva Suri likely arrived at Gangadhara's *Tribhuvana Tilaka Basadi* by 950 CE and completed his literary works there.¹⁹

Vagaraja, who succeeded Arikesari II, shifted the capital to Gangadhara, near Vrishabhadri. After him, Somadeva Suri became the spiritual mentor of King Baddega II. In 966 CE, out of devotion for his teacher, Baddega II constructed the *Shubhadham Jinalaya* at Vemulawada and appointed Somadeva Suri as its head, providing all necessary facilities, according to inscriptions. Baddega II is also said to have translated Somadeva Suri's *Neeti Vakyamritam* into Telugu under the title *Neetishastra Muktavali*. Later, Baddega's son Arikesari III granted the village of Vanikatupula, located in the Repaka Dvadasanta region, to the *Basadi* for use in ceremonial offerings, as per the Parbhani Copper Plate inscription.²⁰

In this way, Somadeva Suri was patronised by three generations of Vemulawada rulers and produced extraordinary Sanskrit literature while residing in the region. His Sanskrit writings have become a symbol of honour and pride for the Telangana people. Among his contemporaries, he stood out as a foremost Jain scholar and poet. Consequently, he was honoured with many epithets such as *Vadibha Panchanana*, *Vakkullolapayonidhi*, *Kavikula Raja*, *Shadvadachala Simha*, and *Tarkika Chakravarti*,²¹ all of which proclaim his greatness and fame to the world. His *Yashastilaka* manuscript is preserved at the Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute in Pune, while the *Neeti Vakyamritam* manuscript is housed at the Mysore Oriental Research Institute. His literary contributions are of paramount significance to Telangana's literary tradition. A deeper study of these works can help reconstruct the intellectual legacy of Sanskrit literature and Telangana's ancient cultural heritage.

Other Poets:

The *Bommalaamma Gutta* inscription also mentions poets such as Vadibha Simha and Vadibha Chudamani, who were likely Kannada-language writers, as no Sanskrit or Telugu works exist under these names or epithets. Alongside them, other Sanskrit scholars like Mallikarjuna, Vyaktilingi, Vidyarashi, Vakhyana Bhattaraka, and Peddana Bhattu served in the courts of the Vemulawada rulers,²² though their works have not survived.

Conclusion:

Thus, Rajanna Sircilla district emerged as a cradle for early trilingual literature in Kannada, Sanskrit, an-

d Telugu, and as a residential hub for many poets. The Vemulawada Chalukyas' patronage of literature stands as a glorious chapter in Telangana's history. Their literary support transcended the bounds of language, region, and religion, revealing their universal vision and artistic devotion to the world.

References:

1. "Inscriptions of Andhra Pradesh, Karimnagar District", Hyderabad, 1974, pp.9-10
2. Shastri. B.N, "Vemulawada Charitra-Sasanamulu", Hyderabad, 1991,P.41
3. Venkataramanaiah. N, "The Chalukyas of L(V)emulawada", Hyderabad,1953, pp.9-12; Ramanaiah. J, "History and Culture of Karimnagar District (A.P)",Jagtial, 2008 , pp.47-50
4. Malayasri, "Karimnagar Jilla Telugu Sahitya Charitra", Karimnagar, 1997, p.8
5. Suryanarayana. Kolluru, "Vemulawad Chalukuyula Sahitya Poshana", Bharati, March-1986, p.25
6. Haragopal, Sriramoju: "Pampa Mahakavi Gaatha", Deccan Land, September 2021,p.45
7. Haragopal, Sriramoju: "Pampa Mahakavi Gaatha", Deccan Land, September 2021,p.46
8. Suryanarayana. Kolluru, "Vemulawad Chalukuyula Sahitya Poshana", Bharati, March-1986, p.26
9. "Inscriptions of Andhra Pradesh, Karimnagar District", No-3, The Govt. of Andhra Pradesh, Hyderabad,1974, pp.10-11
10. Sastry. B.N, "Vemulawada Charitra Sasanalu", Musi Publications, Hyderabad, 1991, pp.106-108
11. Haragopal, Sriramoju: "Pampa Mahakavi Gaatha", Deccan Land, September 2021,p.47
12. Chidananda Murthy, M: 'Karimnagar Jillalo Pampa Mahakavi Sodarudu Jinavallabhuni Shasanam – Marikonni Parishodhanamshalu' – Bharati, March 1980
13. Sheshagiri Rao.Ch. (Ed.), 'Telugu Marugulu', Hyderabad,1992, pp.87-91
14. Krishna Kanth. Handiqui, "Yasastilaka and Indian Culture", Jaina Samskriti Samrakshaka Sangha, Sholapur, 1949, p.4
15. Krishna Kanth. Handiqui, "Yasastilaka and Indian Culture", Jaina Samskriti Samrakshaka Sangha, Sholapur, 1949, pp. 2-3
16. Suryanarayana. Kolluru, "Vemulawad Chalukuyula Sahitya Poshana", Bharati, March-1986, p.24
17. Krishna Kanth. Handiqui, "Yasastilaka and Indian Culture", Jaina Samskriti Samrakshaka Sangha, Sholapur, 1949, p.1
18. Venkataramanaiah. N, "Palavulu-Chalukyulu", Madras, 1961, pp.126-27
19. "Gagadhara Shilasasanam", Bharathi, March, 1967, pp.10-23
20. "Inscriptions of Andhra Pradesh, Karimnagar District", No.4, The Govt. of Andhra Pradesh, Hyderabad, 1974, p.12
21. Venkataramanaiah. N "The Chalukyas of L(V)emulawada", Hyderabad, 1953, pp.92-94
22. Chidananda Murthy, M: "Karimnagar Jillalo Pampa Mahakavi Sodarudu Jina Vallabhuni Shasanam – Marikonni Parishodhanamshalu" – Bharati, March 1980