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Life and Works of Poet Somadeva Suri

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Abstract

Telangana has been a cradle of vibrant literary traditions, with significant contributions across multiple languages. Among its most illustrious figures is Somadeva Suri, a Jain monk, philosopher, and Sanskrit scholar who flourished during the reign of the Chalukyas of Vemulawada. His seminal work, *Yashastilaka Champu Kavyam* (959 CE), composed during a southern campaign with King Vagaraja, stands as one of the earliest and most comprehensive *champu* (mixed prose and verse) works in Sanskrit. This text is notable for its philosophical depth, interreligious comparisons, and portrayal of medieval Indian culture. Somadeva also authored the political and ethical treatise *Nitivakyamritam*, hailed as a counterpart to Kautilya's *Arthashastra*, and translated Guṇāḍhya's *Brihatkatha* into *Kathasaritsagara*. His association with Jain centres such as Gangadhara and the *Tribhuvana Tilaka Basadi* established him as a key figure in Telangana's intellectual landscape. Supported by kings like Arikesari II, Vagaraja, and Baddega II, Somadeva influenced not only Sanskrit but also Telugu literary traditions. His legacy, preserved in key manuscript collections, reflects the literary, philosophical, and cultural heights reached in Telangana during the Chalukya era. His works merit renewed attention for their potential to revitalise classical Sanskrit studies and to illuminate the region's literary heritage.

Keywords: Somadeva Suri, *Yashastilaka Champu*, Telangana literary history, Jain literature, *Nitivakyamritam*, Chalukyas of Vemulawada, Sanskrit *Champu* poetry.

Introduction

Telangana has been the birthplace not only of movements and revolutions but also of a vibrant and inspiring literary tradition. A study of the literary history of Telangana reveals the presence of many external languages. The people who shaped those languages and the texts they authored have deep connections to the Telangana region. For instance, Guṇāḍhya, regarded as the first recorded poet from Telangana, was the proponent of *Paishachi Prakrit*,^[1] while the great poet Pampa enriched the Kannada language^[2]. Sarvavarma breathed life into Sanskrit through his work *Katantra Vyakaraṇam*^[3]. Several other significant works across various languages also originated from here.

Somadeva Suri Versatile Personality

One of the literary giants who shaped classical Sanskrit was the great poet Somadeva Suri, who belongs to the illustrious class of writers such as Ashvaghōṣa, Kalidasa, Bāṇa, and Bhaṣa. He was a renowned Jain monk, a great philosopher, and a scholar of Sanskrit^[4]. With exceptional poetic skill, he settled in Telangana and earned eternal fame by composing the Sanskrit *Yashastilaka Champu Kavyam*.

Yashastilaka Champu Kavyam

Yashastilaka is considered one of the earliest *champu* (mixed prose and verse) compositions in Sanskrit literature. The

depth of exposition in this text showcases his philosophical acumen. Somadeva Suri claimed to have completed *Yashastilaka Champu Kavyam* on *Siddhartha Chaitra Madana Trayodashi* of 959 CE during the reign of Vagaraja (955–963 CE), the eldest son of the Chalukya king Arikesari II of Vemulawada (930-950 CE). He mentions that he completed it while accompanying Vagaraja on a southern campaign alongside his overlord, Raṣṭrakuṭa Emperor Krisnavallabha, and while resting at Melpaḍi in the present-day Chittoor district^[5]. The work is also known by another title, *Yashodhara maharaja Charitra*, as it narrates the story of King Yashodhara of Ujjayini in eight cantos. It harmoniously blends engaging prose with eloquent and richly ornamented poetry. Though it primarily expounds Jain doctrines, teachings, myths, and beliefs, it does so in a comparative framework, discussing the roots of all religious traditions, a truly remarkable feature. There is arguably no other literary work that so comprehensively presents the cultural milieu of early medieval India. Apart from historical, geographical, and political aspects, it deeply examines societal, religious, and cultural elements, thereby filling many gaps in the understanding of medieval Indian civilization, as noted by historians^[6].

Other Writings

Somadeva Suri also composed another significant Sanskrit

work titled *Nitivakyamṛitam*. Divided into 32 chapters, this text contains 1550 maxims or aphorisms expressed in simple Sanskrit, embellished with charming proverbs. His primary concern in this work was the welfare of society. He discusses at length how an individual within a family should interact with people of various dispositions in the broader community. Simply put, there is hardly any human behaviour or characteristic that lies outside the scope of this text. It also includes sections on governance and statecraft. The renowned historian A.S. Altekar compared this work to Kautilya's *Arthashastra*, placing it among the great political treatises of ancient India. Somadeva Suri also translated Guṇadhya's *Bṛihatkaṭha*, originally composed during the Shatavahana period, into Sanskrit under the title *Kathasaritsagara*. In addition to these, he authored other works like *Ṣaṇṇavati Prakaraṇam*, *Mahendra Matalee Jalpa*, *Yukti Chintamani Sutra* or *Stava*, and *Syadvada Upaniṣad* [7].

In Vemulawad Chalukyas Courtyard

It is believed that Somadeva Suri was born around 920 CE in Bengal. A Copper Plate inscription from Parbhani dated 966 CE mentions him as belonging to the Gauda community (Bengal) [8]. Some historians suggest he hailed from Gurjara, the present-day Gujarat region. In *Yashastilaka*, he refers to his guru Nemideva, a disciple of the Jain teacher Yashodeva from Karnataka. Before coming to Telangana region, he appears to have served in the court of Mahendrapala II of the Pratihara dynasty. It was a long-established tradition for Jain monks and teachers from northern India to travel to the south [9]. By the time Somadeva Suri arrived in Telangana, the Raṣṭrakūṭas and their vassals, the Chalukyas of Vemulawada, were ardent patrons of Jainism and supported Jain scholars and philosophers.

Centre of Jainism

During the reign of the Chalukyas of Vemulawada, places like Bodhan, Vemulawada, Kolanupaka, Gangadhara, Korutla, and Repaaka flourished as major Jain centres. Notably, the *Tribhuvana Tilaka Basadi* at Gangadhara was a distinguished seat of learning, as evidenced by inscriptions found at *Bommamma Gutta* (Kurikyala). It was a leading Jain educational institution in South India at the time [10]. Literary figures like the Kannada Adikavi Pampa, his brother Jinavallabha, and others such as Vadibha Siṃha, Vadibha Chudamaṇi, Peddanabhaṭṭu, and Malliya Rechana are believed to have resided there, offering instruction not only in literature and philosophy but also in martial training. An inscription reveals that Arikesari II, a foremost king of the Chalukyas of Vemulawada, granted the *agrahara* of Dharmapuri to support the maintenance of this *Basadi*. It is believed that Somadeva Suri, motivated by a desire to learn more about Jain *Digambara* philosophy in the south, reached Gangadhara's *Tribhuvana Tilaka Basadi* around 950 CE and completed his compositions there [11].

Head of the Shubhadhama Jinalaya

Vagaraja, who succeeded Arikesari II, moved his capital to Gangadhara. Somadeva Suri is said to have completed *Yashastilaka* during his reign. Vagaraja's successor, Baddega II, was a disciple of Somadeva Suri. According to inscriptions from Vemulawada, Baddega II built the Shubhadhama Jinalaya (temple) [12] in 966 CE in honour of his guru, appointing him as the head and providing all necessary facilities. It was Baddega II who translated Somadeva's *Nitivakyamṛitam* into Telugu under the title *Nitishastra*

Muktavali. Later, his son, Arikesari III, donated the village Vanikatupula in the Repaka region to the Shubhadhama Jinalaya for ritual offerings, as recorded in the Parbhani Copper Plate inscription [13].

Conclusion

Thus, Somadeva Suri served as a court scholar under three kings of Vemulawada and composed his monumental Sanskrit works while residing in Telangana. These contributions have become the very "*Yashastilaka*" (crown of glory) of Telangana's literary heritage. Among the Jain scholars and poets of his era, Somadeva Suri was one of the greatest. He earned honorific titles such as *Vadibha Panchanana*, *Vakkullola Payonidhi*, *Kavikula Raja*, *Syadvadaachala Siṃha*, and *Tarkika Chakravarti*, all of which bear testimony to his greatness and fame. His *Yashastilaka*, in the form of a palm-leaf manuscript, is preserved at the Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute in Pune, while *Nitivakyamṛitam* is housed at the Oriental Research Institute in Mysore. The works of this great poet Somadeva Suri are of immense significance in Telangana's literary tradition. They deserve deeper study, as they hold the key to revitalising classical Sanskrit literature, culture, and tradition.

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