

# Introduction

Highly original impulses often clothe themselves in available guises. In the second half of the sixteenth century, the Telugu poet Pingali Suranna composed three Telugu *kavyas* (sustained narratives in verse) in his village Krishnarayasamudramu and the small towns of Nandyala and Akuvidu in southern Andhra Pradesh, in the region that is today called Rayalasila. Each of these works, while formally continuous with the classical Telugu tradition of court poetry that reached its apogee in this period, marks a new point of departure.

We have already translated one of these three texts—the *Kala-purnodayamu*, or *The Sound of the Kiss*,<sup>1</sup> a subtle meditation on human emotion in relation to the creative powers of language. We have argued that this *kavya*-text is actually a novel, if by this term we mean a discursive, polyphonic, open-ended arena for the depiction of autonomous individuals endowed with complex interiority.<sup>2</sup> The linguistic concomitants of this new form are clearly present in Suranna's other work, the *Raghava-pandaviyam*, which simultaneously tells the story of the two great epics, *Mahabharata* and *Ramayana*. Such dense intralinguistic playfulness becomes one major vector in the development of Telugu poetry in this period.<sup>3</sup> The contrasting vector, very pronounced in the *Kala-purnodayamu*, takes us toward more directly narrative and novelesque modes, in effect using metrical forms to read like prose. The *Prabhavati-pradyumnamu*, translated here, is a striking example of this new trend.

The history of Telugu literature, like that of many others, has a rather oblique relation to the domains of politics, state-building, and war. The "imperial" edifice of Vijayanagara that had supported such great poets as Peddana and the famous poet-king Krishna-deva-raya in the early sixteenth century had largely collapsed after 1565. Political power was scattered among small rival kingdoms throughout the

southern Deccan, including the Akuvidu and Nandyala courts where Suranna was active. In these remote, miniature polities, often ruled by self-made men drawn from communities newly emergent on the political scene, intellectual and artistic life could be very intense. These little kings often depended more on their poets than vice versa: the poet held in his hands, or on his tongue, the ruler's tenuous hope for fame and status. For their part, multilingual poets and their audiences created a communicative space that connected disparate locales and cultural milieux, a space in which there was room for remarkable experimentation and innovation.<sup>4</sup>

Suranna's period was one of rapid social and structural change. We have elsewhere documented the rise of a highly mobile, nonascriptive elite capable of maneuvering successfully within the unstable political realm and of manipulating (cumulating and investing) the increasingly available free-floating resources.<sup>5</sup> Throughout the eastern Deccan, during the late sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, Velama and Reddi lineages, as well as warriors from farther afield (Karnataka, Bundelkhand, and even as far north as Afghanistan), were carving out more or less autonomous states within a wider system still partly dominated by the last, displaced (Aravidu) dynasty of Vijayanagar and by its major rivals the Golconda and Bijapur Sultanates to the north.<sup>6</sup> European powers were also beginning to impinge on these polities from their footholds on the coasts. But in the interior, in the small towns and royal courts of Rayalasima, a characteristic Deccani ethos survived, rooted in memories of even earlier, Kakatiya-period cultural forms—an ethos of rugged individuals bound in ties of personal loyalty to their overlord, claiming individual ownership of lands and proclaiming the unique status of their lineage by building or patronizing large-scale, clan-based temples.<sup>7</sup> These men were warriors and entrepreneurs, a somewhat surprising amalgam motivated by exemplary stories of singular achievement and endowed with a particular form of historical awareness.<sup>8</sup> They tended to patronize poets who were capable of articulating a novel, experimental vision, rich in political implications, that adapted earlier imperial idioms to the volatile context of the late sixteenth-century Rayalasima courts.

Suranna is an outstanding instance of this experimental trend that generated new expressive modes and distinctive templates of perception.<sup>9</sup> We can see indications of far-reaching change in every major cultural domain: in the refashioning of the political order and the attempts to reimagine its metaphysical basis;<sup>10</sup> in the rise of "left-

hand" temple cults and their eventual takeover of important pilgrimage sites such as Lepaksi and, above all, Tirupati,<sup>11</sup> in a cash-oriented economy and its concomitant effects on the vision of the social order;<sup>12</sup> in a newly crystallizing anthropology, including a revised understanding of gender identities and relations; and in the emergence, in a variety of expressive media (painting, sculpture, and a shifting literary ecology and system of genres), of what is arguably an altered, protomodern sense of self. Let us repeat: we often find powerful conceptual novelty making use of familiar, available materials. Thus Suranna borrowed the story he tells from the *Hari-vamsa*, an ancient *purāna*-like compendium of stories related to Krishna and appended to the *Mahabharata*.<sup>13</sup> On the whole, he follows the inherited story line remarkably closely. Nonetheless, the entire texture of telling has been so radically transformed that both the characters and the meaning of the story are no longer the same. What we see in Suranna's *Prabhavati* is a statement of love as individualized and individualizing emotion animating a psychologically integrated subject. In addition, the poet offers trenchant statements and images about the role of art and imagination in creating various types of reality.

Here are the bare bones of this love story, which fits the *Romeo and Juliet* pattern. An *asura* antiod, Vajranabha, has built an impenetrable city, Vajrapuri. No one—not even the wind—can enter or leave without his permission. From this vantage point, Vajranabha has invaded and occupied Amaravati, the city of the gods and their king, Indra. His intention is to take over the divine kingdom entirely and replace Indra as world ruler. In despair, Indra pleads with Krishna to send help and reinforcements. But how can anyone even approach the hermetically sealed Vajrapuri? After watching a troupe of actors, Krishna suddenly has a bright idea. He could, perhaps, infiltrate an agent into the demons' city in the guise of an actor.<sup>14</sup> But this actor may need a little personal motivation apart from the great matters of cosmopolitics.

Krishna has a son named Pradyumna, a reincarnation of the god of desire, Manmatha or Kama. In Indra's mind, Pradyumna is the right candidate for this mission. To provide extra incentive, Indra orders an extremely articulate female goose named Sucimukhi, "Perfect Speech," to make Pradyumna fall in love with Vajranabha's exquisite daughter, Prabhavati. For her part, Prabhavati has already fallen in love, at a distance, with Pradyumna because of a painting that the goddess Parvati gave her in a dream. Similar budding

romances bind Pradyumna's companions Gada and Samba to two other girls in Vajrapuri: Candravati and Gunavati. Our novel spells out the ins and outs of this dangerous secret mission.

The matchmaking goose Sucimukhi already inhabits the *Hari-vamsa* "parent"-text, as do the actors in whose guise Krishna's team enters the forbidden city.<sup>15</sup> But while the *Hari-vamsa* text tells a fast-paced, hard-hitting story that is ultimately another episode in the eternal war between gods and antigods, for Suranna the narrative frame serves mostly to develop a subtle, personal exploration of the experiences and sensations of falling in love and being in love. This love is of a type that seems never to have been documented before in Indian literature.

To this end, Suranna has invented various episodes and devices.<sup>16</sup> The goose Sucimukhi's persona is vastly expanded beyond the *Hari-vamsa* portrayal, to the point where she effectively masterminds the unfolding plot and, at the same time, continuously comments on the moods and concerns of its major players. Both articulate speech, embodied in this bird, and plastic and performing arts become central to the story and to the psychology of its characters. Pradyumna's portrait, painted by the goddess Parvati, has no precedent in the Sanskrit version of the story. We also have a crucial love letter—probably the first of its kind in South Indian literature—that provides the main structural node of this novel. And while the overt forms of the narration may appear, at first glance, to preserve the somewhat extreme habits of earlier Indian lovers, readers should attune their ears to the gently ironic tone of Suranna's metrical prose. This poet is telling us something unusual: not only about love but also about the life of the imagination in general, and about the ways an artist has of making something, or someone, real. We discuss these themes at length in the afterword; but please read the story first.