Ghanaram, *Dharmamaṅgal*

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Growing up in an immigrant household in the United States where nobody read or spoke English very well, we didn't have much to read in the house. Luckily, my mother would bring home books every now and then that were being thrown away by the people who owned the houses she used to clean. One day, when I was eight or nine years old, to my surprise, she brought home a wonderfully illustrated children's edition of *The Song of Roland* (Fr. *La Chanson de Roland*), the eleventh-century epic poem (*chanson de geste*) based on the Battle of Roncevaux Pass in 778 CE. Being the oldest surviving major work of French literature, it opened up a lost age for me, and it would become the spark that would ignite my longstanding interest in epics.

I wasn't a good student back then in Catholic grade school, but years later, after having voraciously consumed Homer's epics, Beowolf, and many others, I fell in love with India and its culture, which led me to the two Sanskrit epics, one of which was the *Mahābhārata*. In fact, I carried a dog-eared version of it around with me in my backpack during my first fifteen-month odyssey to South Asia when I went overland from Germany to Nepal and back again in the mid-seventies. One line in the first book (*ādiparvan*) of the epic stuck with me, which I paraphrase here from 1.56.33: "Everything [in the *Mahābhārata*] is elsewhere. What is not there is nowhere" (*yadihāsti tadanyatra yannehāsti na tatkvacit*). The noted Indologist J.A.B. Van Buitenen (1973: 130) translates it more literally as: "… whatever is here, ... that is found elsewhere. But what is not here is nowhere else." This lovely little piece of what Alan Dundes once termed metafolkore—folklore about folklore—sparked my curiosity. Do epics really contain everything? Are they world histories disguised as

DOI: https://doi.org/10.17875/gup2023-2271

literature or "myth" in the ill-conceived western sense of falsehood? I would later delve into the academic literature on both written and oral epics as an eager graduate student at the University of Pennsylvania who wished to revive folklore studies in India and elsewhere in South Asia.

Penn was touted as being the best place in the world (or at least in North America) to study Folklore and Folklife at that time, but it also had a renowned South Asian Regional Studies department, which for me was the best of both worlds, so to speak, that allowed me to study folklore and specialize in a geographical area that had enchanted me since high school, when I got interested in both Indian music and spirituality, thanks to The Beatles (especially George Harrison). It was an interest in music and mysticism that first compelled me to make the long and sometimes-arduous journey overland from rural Pennsylvania in the USA to Munich to Kathmandu and back again along the beleaguered "magic bus trail" that was popularized by The Who in the 1979 rockumentary film titled *The Kids Are Alright*, which in reality ran overland back and forth from London to Kathmandu in the sixties and seventies, until the Iranian Revolution in 1978–79 and the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, also in 1978, more or less put an end to it by the eighties, the latter of which I experienced personally. There are quite a few books written about the so-called "hippie trail" and the magic bus route, but McLean (2009) tells it best.

In any case, when I arrived at Penn in 1985 directly from Pakistan, I had switched from the study of Urdu and Hindi to Bengali, which eventually took me to eastern India, where a genre of Middle Bengali literature exists known as *Maṅgalkāvya*. *Maṅgalkāvya*, literally "auspicious poem," is a literary genre of praise poems that most certainly existed as shorter lays in the oral tradition before being committed to pen and paper by literate composers patronized by regional *rājā*s (kings). These long texts praised local Bengali deities, such as goddesses named Chandi and Manasha, but also a curious male deity known as Dharmaraj ("king of duty") or simply Dharma ("duty") for short, the grand lord who ruled over the entire cosmology (Korom 2020a). His story—told in a sub-genre of *Maṅgalkāvya*—is known as *Dharmamaṅgal*, the "auspicious dharma." Various recensions of the text exist, mostly written by high-caste writers, but a Brahmin poet named Ghanaram (b. 1669 CE) composed the longest and most poetic version of the epic narrative, for which he received the title *kavikaṅkan*, the "jewel of poets" (see Korom 2020b: 304).

Like the Sanskrit *Mahābhārata*, Ghanaram's text is a rambling one that is almost 1,000 pages long, with stories emboxed in yet other stories. But the difference between the two is that the Sanskrit *Mahābhārata* had national, pan-Indian appeal, whereas the *Dharmamaṅgal* had vernacular resonances, evoking the topography of Bengal in flowery poetic prose. Indeed, the text focuses exclusively on the area known in medieval Bengal as Rarh, which is the core region of the province that is comprised of three contiguous districts where Dharmaraj worship is still practiced exuberantly today. It is a panegyric text that predestines the hero Lausen to be born

in the human realm and go through a variety of trials and tribulations before he can establish the widespread worship of Dharmaraj on earth. He and his dimwit brother, Karpur ("camphor"), must thus stave off first humiliation at the hands of a prostitute during a riddling context, then through various battles with a host of monstrous animals, not to mention bloody human wars in which scores and scores of people perish only to be revivified in the end by the deity who shows mercy to his devotees after Lausen makes the sun rise in the west by hacking up his body into pieces as a sacrificial offering to his chosen god, Dharma.

To conclude, I thought it would be a useful exercise to provide the first ever translation of a description of the hero Lausen's horse, since one of the things that attracted me to Roland's epic as a child was the color print of him in full regalia riding upon his own trusty steed. I was later to learn from Cecil Bowra that descriptions of heroes' horses are central to epics around the world, since they are part of the "mechanics" of epic narrative to add "persuasiveness" and a "realistic" appeal to the storyteller's art (Bowra 1952: 179–214). As he writes, "No animal invites so technical or so discriminating a knowledge or excites stronger affection and admiration. Heroic poets know about horses and study them with professional appreciation" (173). Let me therefore end this brief confession by providing the context for the concluding description of Lausen's mount, beautifully scored by Ghanaram in the verses below.

After slaying a madly intoxicated elephant that was destroying the kingdom of his maternal uncle and arch enemy, Patra, and then restoring it to life, the little king reluctantly announces that he will reward Lausen for this noble deed by granting him a horse, even though "shamed … like a leech with lime in its mouth" (Mahāpātra 1962: 340). Little did the scheming king know that the horse he was about to gift the hero was divinely ordained by the super simian Hanuman (= Hanu), the messenger of the Creator in the *Dharmamaṅgal* and ultimate devotee of Ram, one of the ten incarnations of Vishnu, to whom our featured poet is devoted! The following is my translation of a description taken from the *hastībadh pālā* ("elephant-slaying chapter") of Ghanaram's text, which is written in couplet (*payār*) form:

The king said, "Son, if you are agreeable,
Then examine carefully and pick out a beautiful horse."
Hailing the order, the two brothers went into the stable.
The jewel among the poets composes an interesting song.
Meditating on the preceptor's feet, they went to the stable.
At this time, the mighty Hanu became favorable.
Being kind, he gave advice to the devotee [saying],
"The strong, variegated [steed] is there in disguise.
[It is] he who was the heavenly horse pulling the Sun's chariot,
[and] for your sake he was reborn in India.
Oh Lord, look at the last of the seven horses in the stable,

Which is chewing bad fodder carelessly facing the northeast.
Seeing you, the horse will start neighing."
So saying, [Hanuman] disappeared.
In joy, the Lord ran at Hanu's command,
Carefully gazing around the stable one by one.
He found many fresh mares and steeds.
Some were mountain ponies, some were Persian, of beautiful color.
Some were yellow, some tawny, some were blue in color.
He noticed various types of horses, black and white,
But no horse captivated his mind.
He entered where the variegated male one [was].
The horse started neighing, looking at the Lord's face.
Sen remarked, "Oh gosh, it's from Iraq (*erāki*)"!
The horse's color is incomparable, like that of the waters of the Ganges.
Its four restless feet tawny,
Its belly white, back blue, [with] a tail of beautiful color.
Karpur said, "Oh brother, this is that horse!
This [is] the mark, just as was prophesied by the valiant one!"
They bound the horse, circumambulating him many times.
"If you are pleased, I shall take you home."
The horse with a pleasant face said,
"Lord, you are the Creator's son.
You have received me by writ of the hero [Hanu].
Having drawn the Sun's chariot, I remember [all past] lives.
I exist now as a mad horse.
I came and went regularly, encircling [Mount] Sumeru,
But for your sake the Lord of the World caused me to be born on earth.
Yet while I gallop, [my] hoofs do not touch the ground
Now it comes to mind [just] how far heaven [really] is."
(Mahāpātra 1962: 341–42)

The two brothers then take their chosen horse into the king's assembly, where the crowd looks on in astonishment, yelling that they chose the crazy one and begging them to choose another. But only the "most sinful" uncle was pleased with their choice. After some wrangling, the brothers take possession of the horse, which is in need of a good bath.

By scrubbing the horse's body they removed the dirt,
[Then] braided a lovely plait on the horses neck,
With golden, silken threads woven into it.
The saddle, colored with jewels, shined on [its] back.
Emeralds, silver, gold, diamonds, and rubies,
[So many] colorful jewels sparkled on the saddle of the horse!

Resounding bells on beautiful anklets,
Jingled in accompaniment to its trot.
With golden ornaments on its forehead and a wonderful plume,
[And] tight, brilliant ropes and reigns adorning its muzzle.
Silver stirrups hung from its torso.
[Its] mouth was fastened with a lovely rein.
[The] entire body was covered with gold embroidered cloth.
Having [thus] dressed up the horse, the stable hands brought it out.
On its body were beautiful cloths, fringes tied to its head.
[And] as one pulled on the rein cord, its tail wagged.
(Mahāpātra 1962: 343-44)

Having tamed the wild steed, Lausen then, like a gymnast, mounted it dramatically and galloped around the town, much to the chagrin of the evil Patra. The text continues for another 700 pages or so, before the penultimate battle and Lausen's final sacrifice for his deity Dharma, who then appears and resuscitates everyone that has been killed in the preceding carnage. But that story will have to wait for another day.

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