



## On the Name Devan#gar#

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The phraseology of verse 3 is curious: the *ṛṣi* became an anthill (valmīka) and was not simply built into one. Can Cyavana be the Valmīka from whom Vālmiki is derived? It is an intriguing thought but it seems impossible that both epics could then be ignorant of this relationship.

The similarity between the two episodes incorporating this strange motif is so striking that Citrav Śāstri was led to conclude that it gave rise to a mixing up of the two sages and that it is for this reason that Vālmiki was given the designation Bhārgava.<sup>34</sup> This is a brave attempt to cut through the maze of the Vālmiki-Bhārgava issue. It probably contains a grain of truth in that it is far from unlikely that the late story of Vālmiki's anthill was borrowed from the Cyavana episode in an effort to provide a convincing etymology for at least one of the *ādi kavī*'s three names. But, as the epics do not themselves apply the anthill motif to Vālmiki, the argument as a whole is not convincing.

#### CONCLUSIONS

It appears little short of extraordinary that the Sanskrit epics which revel in the accounts of the deeds, origins and antecedents of even the most trivial characters, should offer such scanty and muddled evidence concerning a figure of the stature of Vālmiki. The *Mahābhārata*,

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used again in the case of Cyavana who it is said remained immobile underwater at the confluence of the Gaṅgā and Yamunā, became intimate with the fish and was covered with water weeds, shells, etc., *Mbh.* XIII. 50. 9-19.

<sup>34</sup> *Prācīna Caritra Kośa*, s. v. Vālmiki.

by way of contrast permits no such obscurity to shroud the background of its legendary author.

So astonishing is this omission, which leaves the commentators fumbling in clumsy efforts to provide consistent etymologies for the sage's three epithets, that one is forced to the conclusion that the information is almost wholly unknown to the epic redactors. In the highly Bhṛguised *Mahābhārata*, it appears impossible to prove, and only in one instance even to suggest that Vālmiki is known as a Bhārgava. In the *Rāmāyaṇa* itself this identification is made only twice, both times in the late *Uttarakāṇḍa*. The *Mahābhārata*, the central core of the *Rāmāyaṇa* and even the late *Bālakāṇḍa*, otherwise a source of much information concerning Vālmiki, appear not to know of it. The matter of Pracetas and Prācetasā will require further investigation, but again, in the epic literature only the *Uttarakāṇḍa* seems to know both that sage and that epithet in connection with Vālmiki.

On the basis of this evidence one may hazard several interesting conclusions. For one it would appear that the *Uttarakāṇḍa* is, at least in part, later than the *Bālakāṇḍa* but, unless we can find another source for Aśvaghōṣa's line, earlier than the *Buddhacarita*. For another it may be asserted that if at all the process of Bhṛguisation can be said to have affected the *Rāmāyaṇa*, it has touched only the two latest *kāṇḍas*, the *Bāla* and the *Uttara*. In the former it has operated, in the same way as in the *Mahābhārata*, although to a much less pronounced degree, by the inclusion or insertion of a number of Bhārgava references and episodes. In the latter it would seem that the Bhṛguisation has affected not so much the poem as the poet.

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### *On the Name Devanāgarī*

The paper discusses the name "Devanāgarī" as applied to the Indian script and the possible derivation of the word.

The name "Devanāgarī" has long been something of a puzzle to scholars.<sup>1</sup> Some regard it as a derivative of

<sup>1</sup> That the name is obscure in meaning and origin has been asserted in various Sanskrit grammars, e.g., those of Whitney, Macdonell, Thumb-Hauschild; cf. also Hans Jensen, *Sign, Symbol, and Script: an Account of Man's Efforts to Write*, 3rd ed., transl. from German by George Unwin (New York, 1969), p. 375, n. 1: "The name cannot be accounted for very clearly ('[script] of the divine city?')."

*devanagara* "city of the gods" and hence interpret it as "[script] of the city of the gods" or by some equivalent phrase.<sup>2</sup> Yet others, and it is hard to say which form the

<sup>2</sup> E.g., A. L. Basham, *The Wonder That Was India* (London, 1954), p. 397; M. R. Kale, *A Higher Sanskrit Grammar*, 7th ed. (Bombay, 1931), p. 1: ". . . the alphabet in which it is written is called Devanāgarī (sic!), or that employed in the cities of the gods"; A. Ballini, article in the *Enciclopedia italiana*, vol. XIX, p. 52f: "della città degli dei"; A. M. Pizzagalli, *Elementi di grammatica*

majority, view it as a compound, consisting of *deva* and *nāgarī*, meaning either "city [-script] of the gods" or "city [-script] of the Brahmans" or "city [-script] of the kings," the word *deva* being capable of any of these renderings.<sup>3</sup>

But "Devanāgarī" is also known more simply as "Nāgarī," a name that is probably even more prevalent in India than the longer name, which appears to be more popular among scholars outside of India. "Nāgarī," as the name of a particular script, is fairly old, being mentioned along with several other scripts by Al-Bērūnī, c. 1030 A.D., who refers to an alphabet called Nāgara (sic!), which he says was current in the Mālava country.<sup>4</sup> This statement is particularly interesting, as the earliest example of a text written entirely in Nāgarī characters, an inscription of the Rāṣṭrakūṭa King Dantidurga, stems from 754 A.D.<sup>5</sup> The earliest mention of the word "Nāgarī"

*sanscrita* (Milano, 1931), p. 4: ". . . scrittura della città degli dei = scrittura divina, dei brāhmani"; Thumb-Hauschild, *Handbuch des Sanskrit*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. completely rev. ed. (Heidelberg, 1958), vol. I, p. 188, § 43: "Vielleicht heisst *devanāgarī* (sc. *lipiḥ*) einfach "(die Schrift) von Devanagara," d. h. der "Götterstadt" oder "göttlichen Stadt" = "Himmel," ein Ausdruck, durch den wohl die göttliche Herkunft dieser Schrift demonstriert werden soll . . ."

As a secondary derivative from *devanāgara*, the form \*Daivanagarī (i.e., with vowel strengthening of the initial syllable instead of the second member of the compound) ought normally to be expected, but Whitney, *Sanskrit Grammar*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Cambridge, Mass., 1955), §1204e, gives many examples of this interchange of vowel modification. For a discussion of this point, v. Thumb-Hauschild, p. 188, n. 11. On the curious variant Daivanāgarī (!) with double vṛddhi, used by the early German scholar Othmar Frank, v. note 9 below.

<sup>3</sup> E.g., A. A. Macdonell, *Sanskrit Grammar for Students*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. (London, 1927), p. 2: "city writing of the gods"; Max Müller, *Sanskrit Grammar* (London, 1866), p. 1: "Nāgarī of the gods, or possibly, of the Brāhman"; St. Petersburg lexicon, under the entry Devanāgarī: "göttliche d.i. heilige Stadtschrift"; L. Renou and J. Filliozat, *L'Inde classique* (Paris, 1953), p. 678: "citadine des dieux" (but questioningly).

<sup>4</sup> Alberuni's India, *An Account of the Religion, Philosophy, Literature, Geography, Chronology, Astronomy, Customs, Laws and Astrology of India about A.D. 1030*, transl. into English by Eduard Sachau (London, 1910), vol. I, p. 173.

<sup>5</sup> G. Bühler, *Indische Palaeographie*, in *Grundriss der indoarischen Philologie und Altertumskunde* (Strassburg, 1896), p. 51: "Die älteste Inschrift aber, welche ganz in diesem Alphabete geschrieben ist, findet sich auf den

by a European is apparently to be found in the letters of the Italian traveller Pietro della Valle, who in 1622, while in Persia on his way to India, became acquainted with an Indian Brahman (Damodel Sami) who at Della Valle's request wrote down his own name in characters which he learned from him were called "Nagher" (i.e., Nāgarī).<sup>6</sup>

Kupferplatten des Rāṣṭrakūṭakönigs Dantidurga von 754 p. Chr., aus Sāmangaḍh im südlichen Marathenlande (Kolapur)."

<sup>6</sup> For a general discussion of the various passages where Della Valle mentions the Nāgarī script, v. Theodor Zachariae "Pietro della Valle über das Nāgarī-Alphabet" in his *Kleine Schriften* (Bonn, 1920), pp. 8-12, also in *Wiener Zeitschrift für die Kunde des Morgenlandes*, XVI (1902), pp. 205-210.

Another European, the French traveller Jean Chardin, who went to Persia and India not long after Della Valle, but whose account was not published in full until 1711, actually brought back with him a fairly complete chart of the Nāgarī alphabet, which, however, he does not call by name and erroneously imputes to the ancient Zoroastrians of Persia ("J'ai inséré dans cet ouvrage, pour la satisfaction des Curieux, un Alphabet de ces anciens Perses, ou Guebres, en grandes et petites Lettres"); v. Zachariae, "Das Nāgarī-Alphabet bei Jean Chardin," in his *Kleine Schriften*, pp. 12-14, also in *WZKM*, XIX (1905), p. 243ff. A reproduction of Chardin's alphabet may be found on p. 519 of the article by Hauschild referred to farther on in this note.

Curiously, neither the names "Nāgarī" nor "Devanāgarī" occur in the tables of the Nāgarī script prepared in 1664 by Pater Heinrich Roth, the Bavarian missionary to India, for inclusion in Athanasius Kircher's *China Illustrata* (Amstelodami, i.e., Amsterdam, 1667). On the one table, which gives a transcription of the Lord's Prayer into Nāgarī letters, they are referred to as "Indian letters" (Pro Exercitio huius Linguae ponam hic Pater noster Literis Indicis scriptum). Nor does Kircher himself anywhere in this work nor in any of his other voluminous writings use the word "Nāgarī"; on this and many other particulars, including reproductions of Roth's tables, v. Richard Hauschild, "Die erste Publikation der indischen Nāgarī-Schriftzeichen in Europa durch Athanasius Kircher und Heinrich Roth" in *Wissenschaftliche Zeitschrift der Friedrich-Schiller-Universität Jena*, Jahrg. 5, 1955/56, *gesellschafts- und sprachwissenschaftliche Reihe*, Heft 4/5, pp. 499-520; cf. also Zachariae "Das Devanāgarī-Alphabet bei Athanasius Kircher" in his *Kleine Schriften*, pp. 1-7, also in *WZKM*, XV (1901), pp. 313-320.

That the name "Nāgarī" does not occur in Roth's tables does not, of course, exclude the possibility of its

On the other hand, Devanāgarī does not appear to be an old name,<sup>7</sup> the earliest attestation possibly being that found in the introduction to Halhed's *Code of Gentoo Laws*, 1776: "The Shanscrit Character, used in Upper Hindostan, is said to be the same original Letter that was first delivered to the People by Brihmā, and is now called Diewnāgur, or the Language of Angels . . ."<sup>8</sup> In fact, the use of the adverb "now" in this statement, if it is not just a turn of phrase (which seems unlikely), even implies that in Halhed's view the longer name had by the time of writing come to replace an older name, which we can reasonably presume to have been "Nāgarī."

It is not difficult to account for the expansion of Nāgarī into Devanāgarī: from the beginning writing in India has been looked upon as divine in origin, as shown by the name Brāhmī "[script] of Brahmā," applied to the oldest of India's scripts, and accordingly "Deva" was prefixed to the name "Nāgarī" to invest the script with a divine provenance. Incidentally, this same tendency toward the sanctification of the written character is also to be seen in the alternative explanation of Devanāgarī, alluded to earlier, which makes of it a derivative from *devanagara*

occurrence in his Sanskrit grammar, the first to be written by a European, which has unfortunately never been published, the ms last having been seen in 1800 by the Spanish scholar Lorenzo Hervás. On the vicissitudes of this ms, v. Bruno Zimmer's interesting article "Die erste Sanskrit-Grammatik: die merkwürdigen Schicksale eines verschollenen Manuskripts" in *Biblos*, Jahrg. 5, Heft 2 (1956), pp. 48-63; an enlarged version of this article, published separately, Vienna, 1957, referred to in Thumb-Hauschild, p. 172, n. 126, is unavailable to me.

<sup>7</sup> So Macdonell, p. 2: "a term of late but obscure origin"; Müller, p. 1: "No authority has yet been adduced from any ancient author for the employment of the word Devanāgarī"; Renou and Filliozat, p. 678: ". . . cette désignation ne se rencontre pas dans les textes et paraisse n'avoir été répandue que par des pandits et surtout des Européens depuis le xvii<sup>e</sup> siècle." There is no reason to suppose any connection between the name "Devanāgarī" and "Devalipi" which is given in the *Lalitavistara* in a list of 64 scripts, where it occurs along with such names as "Nāgalipi, Yakṣalipi, Gandharvalipi, Kinnaralipi, Mahoragalipi, Asuralipi and Garuḍalipi," all of which, if they are not entirely fanciful names, are but examples of the old tendency in India to enshroud the written symbol with a divine aura; v. S. Lefmann's ed. (Halle, 1. Teil, 1902), pp. 125-126.

<sup>8</sup> Nathaniel Brassey Halhed, *A Code of Gentoo Laws, or, Ordinations of the Pundits, from a Persian Translation, Made from the Original, Written in the Shanscrit Language* (London, 1776), p. xxiv.

"city of the gods," this being doubtless a periphrasis for "heaven."<sup>9</sup>

If, then, as seems probable from the scanty evidence available, the original name of the script was simply "Nāgarī," and "Devanāgarī" but a later extension of it, the question next to be considered is the explanation of the name "Nāgarī."

According to the etymology that most readily presents itself—indeed that usually followed by those who treat "Devanāgarī" as a tatpuruṣa or karmadhāraya compound—"Nāgarī," as the feminine of the adjective *nāgara* (modifying *lipī* "script" understood), is a secondary derivative of *nagara* "city, town." But in view of the wide range of meanings that can be implied in an adjective of appurtenance, the specific meaning involved here is obscure. It seems unlikely that by "Nāgarī" was meant the mode of writing that was current in the city as opposed to the country, as this implies the existence of a "country-script" which can scarcely be imagined in any circumstances that prevailed in ancient or medieval India.

Possible, though not provable, is the explanation that the name "Nāgarī" meant the script that originated in the city, i.e., as a product of the refinement and culture of the city. Perhaps a particular city, from which its use spread, was meant, a view suggested in the St. Petersburg lexicon. It is remarkable that Della Valle hazards the guess that "Nāgarī" is derived from the name of a small village called "Naghra," a few miles from Cambay, where he visited a temple dedicated to Brahmā. But he hesitates in this conjecture because he feels that in

<sup>9</sup> But Othmar Frank in *Grammatica Sanscrita nunc primum in Germaniam* (Wirceburgi, i.e., Würzburg, 1823), pp. 1-2, a work not available to me, but cited from Thumb-Hauschild, p. 188, n. 11, calling the script "Daevanāgarica" (i.e., Daivanāgarī!), makes the curious assertion that it is so named because "it was employed in Daevanāgara (i.e., Daivanāgara), a city of the gods which is said to have once flourished near Kābul"! (Praecipua vero ea est, quae Daevanāgarica nominatur, i.e., Daevanāgarae, in urbe deorum usitata, quae olim prope Cabulem floruisse fertur). This statement is remarkable not only because nowhere else, so far as I know, is a city of this name found, but especially because he calls the script "Daivanāgarī" instead of "Deva<sup>o</sup>." Perhaps this peculiar form of the name, which seems to be an artificial overcorrection of the usual name (v. pendant to note 2 above) as well as the explanation derive ultimately from the English scholar Alexander Hamilton, under whom Frank studied (v. Rosane Rocher's monograph *Alexander Hamilton (1762-1824), a Chapter in the Early History of Sanskrit Philology* (New Haven, 1968), pp. 109-110.

explaining names, especially place names, resemblances to ordinary words cannot be trusted.<sup>10</sup> The history of the Nāgarī script set forth by Bühler does not seem to favor the view of a particular city as responsible for its invention. The earlier inscriptions, prior to that of Dantidurga, are in fact often characterized by a mixture of Nāgarī letters with letters of the Siddhamātrkā type whose vertical strokes are capped by wedges instead of horizontal lines. This implies a gradual development of Nāgarī, in the course of which the wedges were extended on either side of the vertical strokes so as to become lines. Since these inscriptions are found in scattered localities in Gujarāt and Mahārāṣṭra, it may be that the types of letters with flared serifs or headlines were styled "nāgarī" in the sense that they were a product of a development common to various cities throughout the whole area.

Agrawala is of the opinion that the name "Devanāgarī" derives from the eastern city of Pāṭaliputra which was famed simply as Nagara, "the city, the metropolis," so that anything connected with it, whether a style of architecture or writing, etc., was termed "Nāgara" (feminine "Nāgarī") "[the such-and-such] of The City (i.e., Pāṭaliputra)." To the name "Nāgarī" thus formed was prefixed "Deva," which he states is found in Gupta inscriptions as the personal name of King Candragupta II Vikramāditya.<sup>11</sup> But this view seems entirely unsupported, since, among other reasons, the writing on the Gupta coins, which would accordingly have to be Devanāgarī par excellence, is not Devanāgarī, lacking as it does the horizontal headline, its chief characteristic. Moreover, the Nāgarī script was, as we have noted, not developed in the eastern part of India, but in the west, where all the earliest inscriptions in it have been found.

The adjective *nāgara* can also be derived from the proper name "Nāgara," a particular caste of Gujarāṭī Brahmins,<sup>12</sup> who according to Diringer claim to have given the Nāgarī script its name.<sup>13</sup> In the absence of any evidence, however, it is very difficult to appraise this

<sup>10</sup> *The Travels of Pietro della Valle in India, from the Old English Translation of 1664 by G. Havers*, ed. by Edward Grey (Hakluyt Society, no. 84, London, 1892), pp. 112-113.

<sup>11</sup> V. S. Agrawala, "The Devanāgarī Script" in *Indian Systems of Writing* (Delhi, 1966), p. 15.

<sup>12</sup> According to J. H. Hutton, *Caste in India: its Nature, Function and Origins*, 4th ed. (Oxford University Press, 1963), under the entry "Nāgar Brāhman" in the glossary: "A caste of Gujarati Brahman associated in origin with half a dozen towns in the north-east of Gujarāt (< nagar = town)," p. 290.

<sup>13</sup> David Diringer, *The Alphabet: a Key to the History of Mankind*, 3rd ed. (New York, 1968), vol. I, p. 290.

tradition, as it is wholly possible that it arose from the fortuitous similarity between the name of this caste and that of the script. But it is certainly conceivable that the Nāgara Brahmins, while not the inventors of the Nāgarī script, which, as we have seen, was the result of the gradual development of the tendency to spread out the serifs atop the perpendicular strokes of the letters, were somehow connected with its dissemination and popularization. One small point which may perhaps lend some support to the derivation of the name from the Nāgara Brahmins is that Al-Bērūnī calls the script "Nāgara," not "Nāgarī," though in the same passage he speaks of another script which he calls "Ardhanāgarī," "Half-Nāgarī," as being an amalgamation of "Nāgara" and the Siddhamātrkā character. The fact that he uses the feminine form in "Ardhanāgarī" makes it unlikely that he failed to understand the simpler term "Nāgarī" correctly. Can it be that the script was in those days called "Nāgara [lipi]" as well as "Nāgarī"? This possibility is perhaps strengthened by the recurrence of the double forms "Nāgara" and "Nāgarī" in the Italianized transcriptions "Nagher" and "Nagheri" in the writings of Pietro della Valle centuries later.<sup>14</sup>

Though "Devanāgarī" is but an extension of the much older name "Nāgarī" and is therefore synonymous with it, the two are not interchangeable. Thus, what is Devanāgarī may be called "Nāgarī," but not all that is Nāgarī may be termed "Devanāgarī." The reason for this is partly implicit in what was said earlier: Nāgarī developed gradually over a large area, and in the course of this development there arose varieties, some of which at least have come to bear names of their own, e.g., "Bālbodh" and "Moḍī," which are variants used in writing Marāṭhī, and "Nandināgarī" ("Nāgarī of Nandi," i.e., "Śiva or Viṣṇu," thus virtually equivalent in meaning to "Devanāgarī!"), formerly widely employed in southern India to transcribe Sanskrit mss. None of these variants can be called "Devanāgarī," but they may all be designated "Nāgarī." The expanded name "Devanāgarī" may indeed have arisen as a means of distinguishing the basic Nāgarī style of writing from some of the less important varieties, or, what is perhaps more plausible, it may have come into use first under the impulse, already explained, of sanctifying the terrestrial name "Nāgarī" and was in the course of time followed by "Nandināgarī" and the others.

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<sup>14</sup> v. Note 6 above; the 'h' in these spellings is simply a device regularly employed in Italian to prevent a 'g' followed by 'e' or 'i' from being pronounced like the 'j' in English 'jump'.