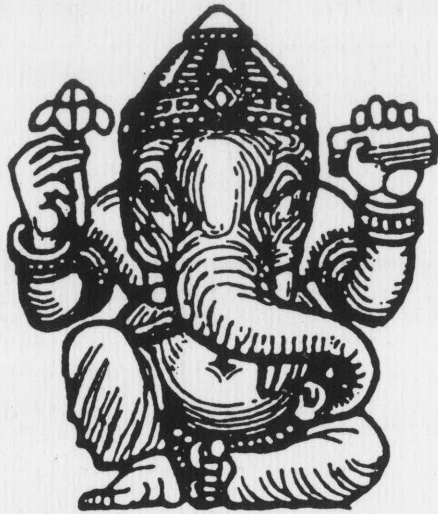


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FONDATEURS

Nalini BALBIR et Georges-Jean PINAULT

Editeur et responsable de la publication : Nalini BALBIR

Comité de lecture :

Colette CAILLAT, Paris; Stephanie W. JAMISON, Harvard;
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Sreeramula Rajeswara SARMA

Gajamauktika: Poetic convention and reality

1. In a well known stanza of the *Kumārasambhava*, Kālidāsa employs a charming motif to describe how hunters track down lions in the Himālayas¹. Lions, he suggests, habitually attack elephants and tear apart the frontal globes on their foreheads (*kumbha*) which are full of pearls (*gajamauktika*, °*muktā*, °*maṇi* etc.). These pearls then get stuck to lions' claws. Therefore, when they walk away, lions leave on their trail elephant pearls together with their own gory footprints. The melting snow washes off the blood from the footprints but the pearls remain, pointing to the path lions took. The hunters just have to follow this pearly track and catch the lions.

Poor elephants have not only lions to contend with. In fierce battles, proud warriors with their mighty swords cleave asunder the heads of the enemy elephants and spill the pearls all around. To Kālidāsa², these pearls scattered on the battlefield appeared as though somebody had sown the seeds of fame which began to sprout in the shape of these pearls³.

2. Kālidāsa seems to be the first to introduce the motif of the elephant pearl into Sanskrit poetry. The poets who came after him took it up enthusiastically and elaborated

1. *Kumārasambhava* 1.6:

*padam tuṣārasrutidhaurakam
yasminn adṣṭvāpi hatadvipānām,
vidantī mārgam nakharendhramuktair
mūktaphalaih kesariṇāṅ kirātāḥ.*

"Where the hunters, though unable to see the footprints of the elephant-killing lions as the melting snow washes off the blood from them, still recognise the lions' path by the pearls that have dropped from the crevices between their claws."

2. More probably to another poet who continued the *Kumārasambhava* beyond the eighth canto.

3. *Kumārasambhava* 16.22:

*śastrahinnebhakumbhebhyo mauktikāni cyutāny adhuḥ
āhavakṣetram abhyuptakīrtibijotkaraśriyam.*

upon it, as they did with many other motifs invented by the great poet⁴.

Thus, in Subandhu's *Vāsavadattā*, we hear of thousands of lions exterminating countless elephants and spilling their pearls atop the Vindhya, the pearls appearing as though the stars had got stuck to the lofty peaks⁵. Or the battlefield strewn with elephant pearls is likened to the ocean floor full of oyster pearls⁶. Bānabhaṭṭa diligently plays on this theme⁷, but also introduces a variation by investing the "aquatic" elephants also with these pearls⁸. All other poets of name dwelt on this theme, and it even found its way into inscriptions. For instance, King Naravarman of Dhārā, who enjoyed the title *sukavibandhu*, describes the valour of an ancestor Siyaka thus in one inscription:

"The cluster of big pearls, which flew up into the air from the frontal globes of the furious elephants cleft by his sword, though constantly falling down, have, disguised as they are as large sparkling stars, not even now reached the earth⁹."

3. But are there really pearls in elephants' foreheads or is it just a poetic fancy far removed from reality? The few Sanskrit texts on Gajaśāstra, i.e. capture, training and

4. Cf. Wilhelm Rau, "Poetical conventions in Indian *kāvya* literature", *Adyar Library Bulletin* 50 (1986), 191-197. For the elephant pearl, see No. 23, where the following occurrences in the major *mahākāvya*s are listed: *Kumārasambhava* 1.6; *Raghuvamśa* 9.65; *Kirātārjunīya* 12.40; *Śiśupālavadhā* 5.12, 30; 14.73; 16.45; 18.44. Though a few more occurrences will be discussed in the following pages, it is not my intention to gather all the occurrences, which may run into hundreds. The motif was indeed very popular.

5. *Vāsavadattā* (Chowkhamba ed.), Benares 1954, 65:

sarabhāsa-kesari-sahasra-khara-nakhara-dhārā-vidārīta-matta-mātāṅga-kumbhasthala-vigalīta-sthūla-muktāphala-sābala-śikharatayā śikharāvalagnaṃ tārāgaṇam ivodvahan ... vindhyo nāma girir adṛśyata.

Another poet extends the metaphor still further and sees a lion in the moon who slays the elephant-darkness and scatters pearl-stars. Koūhala's *Lilāvai*, ed. A. N. Upadhye, Bombay 1949, vs. 23:

*taṃ jaha miyaṃka-kesari-kara-paharaṇa-daliya-timira-kari-kumbhe
vikkhitta-rikkha-muttāhal'ujjale saraya-rayanīe.*

6. *Vāsavadattā*, 29-30:

yasya ca niśīta-nārāca-jarjarita-matta-mātāṅga-kumbhasthala-vigalīta-nistala-muktāphala-nikara-danturita-parisare ... sāgara iva samaraśirasi ... khaḍgo rarāja.

7. Bāṇa touches on the elephant pearl quite frequently, but note especially the multiple motifs in *Kādambarī*, ed. & tr. M.R. Kale, Delhi 1968 (4th ed.) 53: *eṣa nakha-koṭi-vilikhita-vikaṭa-patralekko rudhirapāṭalaḥ kari-mauktikadanturo mrgapatimārgah.*

8. *Harṣacarīta*, ed. Śūranāḍ Kuñjan Pillai, Trivandrum 1958, 338: *jalahastināṃ ca kumbha-muktāphaladāmadanturāṇi dantakhaṇḍakuṇḍalāni* formed part of the tribute received by King Harṣavardhana from Assam. V.S. Agrawala, *Harṣacarīta: eka sāṃskṛtika adhyāyana*, Patna 1964 (2nd ed.) 174, interprets these as round beads carved out of walrus ivory. In the context of Assam, *jalahastin* ought to be the hippopotamus if not the imaginary aquatic counterpart of the terrestrial pachyderm.

9. *Epigraphia Indica*, II, 180-195: "Nagpur stone inscription of Naravarman, A.D. 1104", vs. 21 on p. 184:

*ā gaganam udastuhḥ sthūlamuktocayā ye
yadasidalīta-kupyat-kumbhi-kumbhasthalebhyah
satatam api patantas te 'dya yāvan na pṛthvīm
pṛthula-tarala-tārā-vyājabhājō bhajante.*

The translation is by Kielhorn. On Naravarman's poetic activities, see my "Palaeographic notes", *Atigarh Journal of Oriental Studies* 3 (1986) 125-140, esp. 133-134.

treatment of elephants, like the *Mātaṅgalīlā*¹⁰, *Hastividyāṛṇava*¹¹, or *Hastyāyurveda*¹² do not mention the occurrence of pearls or pearl-like substances in the elephant's body, nor does the *Arthaśāstra* which contains the earliest discussion on the domestication of the elephant¹³. Varāhamihira's *Bṛhatsaṃhitā* too does not mention the elephant pearl in the chapter on elephants¹⁴, but it has a long account in the chapter on pearls¹⁵. Thus according to Indian thinking, *gajamauktika* pertains to Ratnaśāstra and not to Gajaśāstra¹⁶, and it is to the former Mallinātha turns when he has to explain the poetic usage of the *gajamauktika*. Commenting on *Kirātārjunīya* 12.40, he cites a stanza by Agastya which states that the pearl grows in eight different places: cloud, elephant, fish, snake, bamboo, conch shell, boar and pearl oyster¹⁷. In a similar context elsewhere, he refers to a verse by Buddhabaṭṭa which also enumerates the same eight sources¹⁸.

10. F. Edgerton, *The elephant-lore of the Hindus, the elephant sport (Matanga-Lila) of Nilakantha*, reprint: Delhi 1985.

11. *Hastividyāṛṇava*, ed. Pratapa Chandra Chaudhury, Gowhati 1971.

12. *Hastyāyurveda of Pālakāpya Muni*, Poona 1894.

13. *The Kauṭīliya Arthaśāstra*, ed. & tr. R.P. Kangle, Part I, Bombay 1969 (2nd ed.), Book II, chs. 31-32: *Hastyadyakṣaḥ hastipracāraṇ ca*.

14. *Bṛhatsaṃhitā*, ed. Avadhavahārī Tripāṭhī, Benares 1968, ch. 66: *Hastilakṣaṇādhyāya*.

15. *Ibid.*, ch. 80: *Muktālakṣaṇādhyāya*.

16. Discussing the four classes of elephants, Abul Fazl in his *Ā'in-i Akbarī*, vol. I, tr. H. Blochmann, reprint: Delhi 1977, 125, states the following about the Bhadra elephant:

"It is well-proportioned, has an erect head, a broad chest, large ears, a long tail, and is bold, and can bear fatigue. They take out of his forehead an excrescence resembling a large pearl which they call in Hindi Gaj Manik."

It is not certain whether Abul Fazl's Hindu informants combined here the two traditions of Gajaśāstra and Ratnaśāstra or whether an elephant pearl was actually seen at Akbar's court. Interestingly enough, Akbar's state elephant was called Gajamukta (*ibid.*, 128). See also W. Crooke, *The popular religion and folk-lore of northern India*, reprint: Delhi 1968, II, 240: "The elephant constantly occurs in folk-lore. In the projection of its forehead it possesses a pearl, known as Kunjara Mani, or Gaja Mukta, which is invested with magical qualities."

17. *karināṃ muktāyonitve pramāṇam āhāgastyah:*
jīmūta-kari-matsyāhi-varṣa-śaṅkha-varāhajāḥ
śuktyudbhavās ca vijñeyā aṣṭau mauktikajātayah.

This verse occurs in the *Agastimata* (vs. 83) and in the *Agastīya Ratnaparīkṣā* (vs. 26). Both these texts are published in Louis Finot, *Les lapidaires indiens*, Paris 1896, 77-140 and 179-194 respectively.

18. On *Śiśupālavadha* 5. 30:

gajendra-jīmūta-varāha-śaṅkha-matsyāhi-śuktyudbhava-venūjāni
mauktāphalāni prathitāni loke teṣāṃ tu śuktyudbhavam eva bhūri.
iti gajānāṃ muktākaratve pramāṇam.

Mallinātha quotes this stanza in his commentary on *Kumārasambhava* 1.6 also. It is from Buddhabaṭṭa's *Ratnaparīkṣā* (vs. 52), published in Finot, op. cit., 1-58.

4. Buddhabhaṭṭa and Agastya wrote manuals on Ratnaśāstra where they discussed these eight types of pearls. According to the former, the pearl oyster (*śukti*) produces the real pearl which can be bored and strung into necklaces. The other seven types are rare. These should not be pierced and worn as common ornament but revered for their great magical potency. Of these, the pearl from the conch shell is the most potent and that from the elephant the least. The elephant pearl is reddish yellow in colour and has no lustre¹⁹.

The *Agastimata* attributed to the legendary sage Agastya confirms this account and adds that this pearl is as large as a myrobalan fruit²⁰. Other writers also speak of the rarity and the reddish or orange tint of this pearl²¹. The *Agastyasaṃhitā*, in particular, lays down that the elephant pearl should be mounted in gold and venerated by kings²².

As against this, poets persist in dwelling on the abundance of the *gajamauktika*; for them, when it is not freshly extracted and dripping in elephant's blood, it is sparkling white like a star. Again, unlike Ratnaśāstra which attributes magical power to the elephant pearl and prohibits its use in ornaments, poetic convention treats it as an ornament of the jungle folk. In the *Kirātārjunīya*, when Śiva assumes the garb of a tribesman, he wears on his chest a string of sparkling elephant pearls²³.

This dichotomy between the *śāstra* and the *kāvya* is all the more conspicuous in the two works of the Western Cālukya ruler Someśvara III. In his *Mānasollāsa*, he declares that the elephant pearl is so rare that it is impossible to acquire one without performing a penance²⁴. In the *Vikramāṅkābhyaḍaya*, on the other hand, there are plenty of elephant pearls everywhere, scattered on the battlefield by warriors, strewn on

19. *Ratnaparīkṣā*, vss. 52-57.

20. *Agastimata* vss. 87-89; verse 88 reads thus:
mandā diptir bhavet teṣāṃ dhātṛīphalaparṭhūni ca
ātāmrāpūtavarānāni gajakumbhodbhavāni ca.

21. *Thakkura Pherū's Rayanaparikkhā*, tr. S.R. Sarma, Aligarh 1984, vs. 40:
maṇḍapaha piyarattā iya uttima jambuchāya majjhaṭhā
vaṭṭāmalayapamānā gayadaṇṇā humti rajjakaṛā.

22. *Agastyasaṃhitā*, ed. Kṛṣṇaprasāda Bhaṭṭarāi, Kathmandu VS 2020, 5: (slightly emended):
airāvanakule jātā ye gajās teṣu jayate (...)
kumbhadeṣe mahābhāgyaṃ mauktikaṃ vijayāvaham (...)
vijigīṣor nṛpasyaitad grhe śatrunibarhaṇam
alaksmināśanaṃ puṇyaṃ vṛttaṃ kanakaveṣṭitam.

23. *Kirātārjunīya* 12.40:
iti tān udāram anunīya viśamaharicandanālinā
gharmajanitapulakena lasadgajamauktikāvaliḡuṇena vakṣasā.

24. *Mānasollāsa of king Bhūlokaamalla Someśvara*, ed. G.K. Shrigondekar, vol. I, Baroda 1967 (2nd ed.), 67:
426ab. *gajādijaṃ sudusprāpaṃ mauktikaṃ tapasā vinā*
428. *kāmbojakumbhasambhūtaṃ dhātṛīphalāsamaṃ nibham*
ātāmrāpiṇjaracchāyaṃ mauktikaṃ mandādīdhi.

the forest floor by lions, or strung into necklaces by comely women²⁵.

5. In his *Bṛhatsaṃhitā*, Varāhamihira introduces a new note into the subject : “Elephants born in the race of Airāvata, or those born under the asterisms Puṣya or Śravaṇa, or on Sundays or Mondays, or during the sun’s northern progress, or at the time of solar or lunar eclipses, belong to the Bhadra class. In the frontal globes on their foreheads (*kumbha*) and in the pouches from which tusks issue forth (*saradakośa*) there grow plentiful of pearls of large size, of many shapes and full of lustre. They have such great splendour and are so sacred that they cannot be priced, nor can a hole be bored into them. When kings wear these, they bestow sons, victory and health²⁶.”

Leaving aside the great magical power and lustre which he assigns to this pearl in contrast to Buddhabhaṭṭa and others, Varāhamihira is the only writer to state that the pearls grow also at the root of the elephant’s tusks, apart from the frontal globes. Here Varāhamihira appears to record two traditional beliefs which gave rise to two distinct poetic conventions, one in Sanskrit and the other in Tamil.

6. George L. Hart²⁷ investigates these two poetic conventions and observes: “In Tamil, they are said to come from the tusks, while in Sanskrit they are supposed to be from elephants’ temples.” Hart gives examples from Tamil, a few of which are reproduced here.

In *Malaiṇṇaṭṭaṅṅam* 518, a mountain is described as having “many bunches of tusks that have pearls [torn from] elephants of great strength suffering from hard wounds after fighting with striped tigers.” *Kuṛiṅcippāṭṭu* 35-36 speaks of “elephant tusks filled with *muttu[s]*”, i.e. pearls. In *Puramānūru* 161 one comes across the belief that only strong and mature elephants produce pearls in their tusks. It occurred to Hart “that the so-called pearls in the tusks of elephants might be excrescences that grew there,” but he goes on to say:

“Unfortunately, I have nowhere been able to find any reference to such growth in books on elephants or on ivory, and I have been forced to conclude that the Tamil ‘pearls’ are as imaginary as their Sanskrit counterparts.”

There is, luckily, no cause for this despair. We have shown references to the elephant

25. *Vikramāṅkābhyaḍaya*, ed. Murari Lal Nagar, Baroda 1966, 20: *karāla-karavāla-dhārā-vidārīta-vairi-vāraṇa-kumbhasthala-vigālīta-sthūla-muktāphalālāṅkīṭa-samarāṅgaṇa-dharaṅṅiḥ*; p. 35: *kuṭracit prakupīta-mṛgapatī-nakhara-prakhara-prahāra-vidārīta-samāda-kumbhi-kumbhasthalocchālīta-rudhīrāruṇa-sthūla-muktāphalopajānīta-takṣaṇakāleṇdragopabhramam*; p. 37: *priya-nihata-karī-kumbha-muktāphala-śabala-guṅjāphala-hārabhūṣīta-kaṅṭha-saṅkaṭa-payodhara-madhyaḅhiḥ ... pulindasundarībhiḥ*.

26. *Bṛhatsaṃhitā* 80.20-22:

*airāvatakulajānām puṣyaśravaṇendusūryadivaseṣu
ye cottarāyaṇabhavā grahaṇe ’rkendvoś ca bhādrebhāḥ
teṣām kīla jāyante muktāḥ kumbheṣu saradakośeṣu
bahavo bṛhatpramāṇāḥ bahusaṃsthānāḥ prabhāyuktāḥ
naiṣām arghaḥ kāryo na ca vedho ’tīva te prabhāyuktāḥ
sutavijāyārogyakarā mahāpavitṛā dhṛtā rājñām.*

27. *The poems of ancient Tamil: Their milieu and their Sanskrit counterparts*, Berkeley-Los Angeles-London 1975, 150-151.

pearl in Ratnaśāstra, and now we shall cite modern accounts where pearl-like outgrowth in the tusks and in the forehead is recorded.

7. First the Tamil pearl. P.D. Stracey, who worked as forest officer in Assam and is well informed about elephants and their lore in Assamese tradition, reports thus:

“The myth that a certain super race of elephants possessed pearls in their skulls may also have had its origin in very ancient times. At least one case of something which primitive fancy might well have regarded as ‘pearl’ has been reported in the present century. During the 1928 *khedda* operations in the Chittagong Hill Tracts, a Forest Officer who had to destroy a wild tusker found a small oval object, about as big as a man’s little finger nail, in the fleshy pith of one of the tusks. It had the appearance and consistency of ivory, but was slightly rough and striated. The elephant men were very excited and claimed that it was a *gaja-mukta* or elephant pearl and extremely valuable²⁸.”

8. About the pearl from the elephant’s forehead, we have a colourful account from a high personage who once owned it. The grandfather of Vijayaraje Scindia of Gwalior was a Rana with claims to the office of Prime Minister of Nepal, but was forced to flee from Nepal and live in Sagar in central India. From his country, he brought with him a fabulous elephant pearl and hoped that he would soon be restored to a position of eminence back home. “For”, explains Mrs Scindia in her autobiography,

“Rana Khadga Shamsheer had in his possession the Gajmani. The Gajmani was not a pearl; it looked like a pearl, with both sheen and translucence of nacre but it was, in fact, an oval shaped piece of bone the size of pigeon’s egg. It had been found embedded in the forehead of Nepal’s legendary eighteenth-century elephant, Gajraj, who was said to have been twelve feet tall. Today you can see his enormous skull in the Royal Museum at Kathmandu, with a hole the size of a cricket ball right in the middle of the forehead where the stone had been hacked out.

The great unnatural pearl the Ranas believed was some sort of diabolical talisman, which could bring good or bad luck, made its possessor rich and powerful or cause his ruin²⁹.”

The pearl did not help the Rana. On the contrary, it was thought that his heirs suffered ill-luck because of it. So Mrs Scindia sold it to a Bombay jeweller. To complete the account, once again in Mrs Scindia’s words:

“In 1967 on a visit to Nepal as a guest of King Mahendra, I saw the elephant’s skull in the museum. Thinking it best that the Gajmani should return to where it originally came from, I bought it back ... I then sent the Gajmani as a present to King Mahendra. Judging by the eminence he has acquired in Nepal’s affairs, I can only surmise that it served His Majesty well³⁰.”

28. *Elephant Gold*, London 1963, 35.

29. Vijayaraje Scindia, with Manohar Malgonkar, *Princess: The autobiography of the Dowager Maharani of Gwalior*, London 1985, 11.

30. *Ibid.*, 14. I understand that the pearl is now displayed along with the skull in the Royal Museum at Kathmandu.

9. Thus both Sanskrit and Tamil poetic traditions are based on a small core of reality. Why Tamil poets should like the idea of pearls in the tusks and why pearls spilling out of the elephant's forehead should appeal to those composing in Sanskrit is a problem I cannot resolve. In Sanskrit poetry, however, another motif also came into play. This is the assumption that a lion, even if it were a cub, is by nature inclined to jump on to the head of the elephant and tear it apart³¹. Modern jungle literature does not confirm this belief. Lions hunt in packs and may not attack as large a prey as the elephant.

10. Be that as it may, it is certain that the elephant pearl is a real object and that it is an outgrowth, though rare, in the forehead or at the root of the tusks. Such outgrowths occur in many other animals. Because of their rarity, they are invested with magical powers, or with aphrodisiacal or anti-venomous properties.

Sometime before the sixth century A.D. when Varāhamihira wrote the passage cited above, such real outgrowths in elephants, boars, fishes/whales, bamboo joints and conch shells, together with some imaginary things like cloud pearls and snake pearls, were grouped together with oyster pearls, and classified as eight types of pearls, because all these are organic substances in contradistinction to diamonds and other precious stones³².

In Kālidāsa's time India produced more true pearls than today but elephant pearls must have been equally rare³³. But a vague knowledge of the *gajamauktika* was enough to kindle his imagination and he wove fine imagery around it. Poets who followed him, like the hunters in the Himalayas, had just to pick up the "pearls" he left on the trail.

31. The best example is Bhartṛhari's lapidary stanza in D.D. Kosambi (ed.), *The epigrams attributed to Bhartṛhari*, Bombay 1948, vs. 75:

*siṃhaḥ śīṣur api nīpatati madamalinakapolabhittiṣu gajeṣu
prakṛtīr iyaṃ sattvavatām na khalu vayas tejaso hetuḥ.*

See also vs. 17. But the convention goes back to Vālmiki, cf. *Rāmāyaṇa* (crit. ed.), 6.60.2:

*mātaṅga iva siṃhena garuḍeneva pannagaḥ
abhibhūto 'bhavad rājā Rāghavena mahātmanā.*

See also 6.101.53; 109.10.

32. Cf. Ṭhakkura Pherū's *Rayaṇaparikkhā*, 53-56.

33. Cf. *Cāṇakyaśataka* by Cāṇakyaṇḍita, ed. Jībanānanda Vidyāsāgara Bhaṭṭācārya, Calcutta 1896, vs. 55:
*śaile śaile na māṇikyāṃ mauktikaṃ na gaje gaje
sādhavo na hi sarvatra candanaṃ na vane vane.*

RESUME

Comment la convention poétique n'est pas sans fondement dans le réel.

Sont ici passées en revue les différentes sortes d'allusions littéraires aux perles que contiendraient les tempes des éléphants (selon les conventions de la poésie sanskrite, ou la base de leurs défenses (dans la poésie tamoule). Ces bijoux sont d'autre part mentionnés dans une liste stéréotypée des *Ratnaśāstra* (non dans les *Gajaśāstra*).

Deux témoignages contemporains, l'un d'un fonctionnaire britannique préposé à la surveillance des forêts de l'Assam, l'autre d'une princesse de Gwalior, confirment la présence occasionnelle, chez des éléphants de grande taille, soit à la base d'une défense, soit au milieu du front, d'une petite sphère osseuse d'un volume comparable à l'ongle du petit doigt ou à un oeuf de pigeon, et dont l'apparence rappelle l'ivoire ou la nacre: excroissance semblable à celle qui se trouve aussi chez d'autres espèces animales — assez rare cependant —, d'où les vertus dont les parent les imaginations populaires ou poétiques.

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