OPEN ACCESS
perspektywy kultury / *perspectives* on culture
No. 50 (3/2025)

Hermina Cielas Leão
http://orcid.org/0000-0002-4709-3043
Jagiellonian University in Kraków
hermina.cielas@uj.edu.pl
DOI: 10.35765/pk.2025..5003.23

Kristubhāgavatam, the Slaughter of Innocents, and the Requirements of the *Mahākāvya* Genre[1]

ABSTRACT

The paper analyzes selected passages from *Kristubhāgavatam* ("On Holy Christ"), a Sanskrit epic (*mahākāvya*) on the life and deeds of Jesus composed by P.C. Devassia (1906–2006). Focusing on the episode of the Slaughter of the Innocents, the author examines how Devassia interpreted and adapted the formal requirements of the *mahākāvya* genre and what literary techniques he used to construct an epic that conforms to the classical model outlined by theoreticians. Furthermore, through an analysis of selected verses, the article shows how Devassia enriched the narrative of Jesus with numerous references to Indian culture and how he skillfully wove in the fabric of the poem to bring the story of Christ closer to the contemporary Indian reader. The paper also considers the readership and relevance of modern Sanskrit works, arguing that that although such literary production lies outside the mainstream of contemporary Indian literature, it still attracts attention and finds its recipients.

KEYWORDS: *Kristubhāgavatam*, nativity narrative, modern Sanskrit, *mahākāvya*, Christianity in India

STRESZCZENIE

„Kristubhāgavatam", rzeź niewiniątek i wymogi gatunku *mahākāvya*

Artykuł analizuje fragmenty *Kristubhāgavatam* („O Chrystusie Przenajświętszym"), sanskryckiego poematu epickiego o życiu i czynach Jezusa autorstwa P.C. Devassii (1906–2006). Na przykładzie wątku rzezi niewiniątek autor artykułu pokazuje, w jaki sposób Devassia zinterpretował wymogi gatunku i jakimi środkami posłużył się do skomponowania poematu epickiego odpowiadającego

1 The article is a part of the project "How hard can a dead heart beat? Reflections on Modern Sanskrit Literature" conducted by Prof. Lidia Sudyka and financed by the National Science Center (registration number 2021/43/B/HS2/02046).

Suggested citation: Cielas, H. (2025). Kristubhāgavatam, The slaughter of Innocents, and the Requirements of the Mahākāvya Genre. *Perspectives on Culture*, 3(50), ss. 331–342. DOI: 10.35765/pk.2025.5003.23
Submitted: 30.11.2022 Accepted: 27.08.2023

cechom opisywanego przez teoretyków wzorca *mahākāvya*. Ponadto, poprzez analizę wybranych wersów artykuł pokazuje, w jaki sposób Devassia wzbogacił historię Jezusa o liczne odniesienia do kultury indyjskiej i jak umiejętnie wplótł je w tkankę utworu, aby przybliżyć historię Chrystusa współczesnemu indyjskiemu czytelnikowi. Artykuł porusza również kwestię czytelnictwa i użyteczności współczesnych dzieł sanskryckich; dowodzi, że choć tego rodzaju twórczość literacka nie należy do głównego nurtu współczesnej literatury indyjskiej, to jednak wciąż przyciąga uwagę i znajduje swoich odbiorców.

SŁOWA KLUCZE: *Kristubhāgavatam*, opowieść o narodzinach, sanskryt współczesny, *mahākāvya*, chrześcijaństwo w Indiach

In 1977, Jayabharatam published a work by a Keralan poet and scholar, P.C. Devassia (1906–2006). The theme of composition was unusual for Sanskrit literary production: *Kristubhāgavatam* is an epic poem recounting the life of Jesus Christ. Devassia did not choose this subject at random; he was born into a family of Eastern Catholics belonging to the Syro-Malabar Church, an autonomous church in full communion with the worldwide Catholic Church, renowned for its inculturation with Hindu traditions. Placid Podipara characterizes the community as "Hindu in culture, Christian in religion, and Oriental in worship" (Felix, 2014, p. 33). *Kristubhāgavatam* embodies precisely this synthesis. In the Foreword, V. Raghavan notes that "in Prof. Plakil Chacko Devassia ... there is the ripeness of two traditions, the Sanskritic and the Christian. The latter is the indigenous Indian Christian, rendered more homely by a life-long study of Sanskrit epics and classics" (Devassia, 1977, p. i). The author of the epic also commented on the multicultural character of the work and on the reasons behind the interplay of Christian and Hindu motives in *Kristubhāgavatam*, noting that as a student and teacher he "grew up in an atmosphere of Sanskrit literature" (Devassia, 1977, pp. 1–2), which deeply influenced his writing.

Devassia created a Sanskrit epic on a subject which might seem to lie beyond the scope of the cultural heritage of India. However, as a member of the Syro-Malabar Church, he integrated elements of his cultural and religious background, producing an eclectic work that reflects the complex identity of the contemporary Indian Christian. *Kristubhāgavatam* recounts the life of Christ in the form of a *mahākāvya* ("great poem," a genre characteristic of classical Sanskrit poetry), enriched with numerous allusions to Indian culture, familiar motives from Sanskrit literature, and references to historical figures and events familiar to Indian readers. This synthesis is evident in each episode described by Devassia, including the story of the Slaughter of the Innocents as the focal point of this article.

In the Introduction, Devassia emphasized that his intention was not to translate the Bible but to compose a proper *mahākāvya*, even though "a Sanskrit

Mahakavya must conform to certain norm laid down by Sanskrit rhetoricians ... often incompatible with objective narrative" (Devassia, 1977, p. 1). As we shall see, the specificity of the subject chosen by the author posed certain challenges; for instance, some descriptions specified by the theoreticians of Sanskrit literature as the indispensable elements of *mahākāvya*s are absent from the story of Christ's life. The present article aims to examine the ways in which the author of *Kristubhāgavatam* interpreted the formal requirements of the genre and how, through emphasizing and elaborating upon selected episodes from the life of Jesus, he succeeded in composing an epic that meets the criteria of the *mahākāvya* ideal described by theoreticians, despite the apparent incompatibility between the Sanskrit genre and the Christian theme. Moreover, based on the analyis of selected verses, the article demonstrtes how Devassia enriched the narrative of Christ by the addition of numerous references to Indian culture, skillfully weaving them into the fabric of the poem.

In *Kāvyādarśa* ("The Mirror of Poetry") 1.14–22, Daṇḍin (7th–8th centuries) presented a definition of *mahākāvya* that is often considered paradigmatic. The rhetorician characterized *mahākāvya* as a composition in cantos (*sarga*s) that starts with a benediction, a dedication, or an indication of the subject matter. Daṇḍin emphasized that *mahākāvya* should have its source in epic literature or a true story, address all four aims of human life (*caturvarga*s; virtue, love, wealth, and final beatitude), portray the deeds of an intelligent and great hero, include vivid descriptions and abound in sentiments (*rasas*), emotions (*bhāva*s), and literary embellishments (*alaṃkāra*s).[2] Moreover, the cantos should be of moderate length and composed in meters pleasing to the ear.

Most of these elements can be found in *Kristubhāgavatam*. The work is divided into 33 *sargas* (as noted by Raghavan in the Foreword and Kunjunni Raja in the Introduction [Devassia, 1977, p. ii and v] this number may allude to the length of Christ's life) and opens with a benedictory stanza, a salutation to the star that guided the sages to the infant Jesus, followed by an introduction of the poem's theme (v. 1.3). The narrative, composed in a variety of metrical patterns (with a predominance of *anuṣṭubh* and *upajāti*), culminates in the triumph of the hero (*nāyakābhyudaya*) expressed through the Ascension of Christ.

The prevailing emotions of tranquility, sorrow, courage, and astonishment evoked by the story, together with formal features such as appropriate meters

2 *Rasa*, *bhāva*, and *alaṃkāra* are among the basic categories systematized by the Sanskrit theoreticians and used in the discourse on poetics. *Alaṃkāra* is relatively easiest to define; it denotes poetic embellishments, figures of speech. *Rasa* ("juice," "essence") is a polysemic term that in the context of poetics refers to eight sentiments, aesthetic dominants of poetic works (*śṛṅgāra*, "love," *hāsya*, "laughter," *karuṇa*, "compassion," *raudra*, "fury," *vīra*, "heroism," *bhayānaka*, "terror," *bībhatsa*, "disgust," and *adbhuta*, "wonder." Later, the ninth *rasa*, *śānta* or "peace" was added) evoked by corresponding *bhāvas* or "emotions" – *rati*, "love," *hāsa*, "gaiety," *śoka*, "sorrow," *krodha*, "anger," *utsāha*, "courage," *bhaya*, "fear," *jugupsā*, "disgust," *vismaya*, "surprise," and *śama*, "calmness."

and poetic embellishments, ultimately transform into corresponding sentiments of peace, compassion, heroism, and wonder – the *rasa*s that dominate in the epic. The remaining five sentiments (love, laughter, anger, disgust, and terror) appear only marginally or not at all. The selection of emotional dominants results naturally from the theme of the work and its general message: in a sacred narrative of self-sacrifice, there is little room for comic or amorous elements. Even descriptions of marriages are almost entirely devoid of romantic sentiment. Similarly, the use of *alaṃkāra*s is restrained; those that do appear, particularly simile (*upamā*), alliteration (*anuprāsa*), and *apodixis* (*arthāntaranyāsa*), serve a practical purpose, aiding the transmission of Christ's teachings and integrating references to Indian culture.

According to Daṇḍin (*Kāvyādarśa* 1.16–17), a *mahākāvya* is distinguished by its inclusion of descriptions of a city, the ocean, a mountain, the seasons, moonrise and sunrise, amorous games in a garden and water, wine drinking, love-making, love in separation, nuptials, childbirth and the growth of sons, a council, an envoy, the march of an army, a battle, and, finally, the hero's triumph. Only a few of these elements appear in *Kristubhāgavatam*. The most notable are the descriptions of Mount Carmel (v. 2.4–5), the Temple of Jerusalem (v. 3.9–16), spring (v. 4.3–4), moonrise (v. 4.5), Mount Tabor (v. 10.4–5), wine drinking (v. 13.11–12), sunset (v. 18.42), the scenes of marriage in cantos two and six, and the portrayal of the birth of Jesus in the seventh canto. All of these passages are relatively brief.

One description, however, stands out as particularly characteristic of the work. In verses 7.7–11, Devassia provides a physical depiction of the newborn Jesus, constructing the passage according to the inverted *pādādikeśānta* scheme ("from head to hair feet").[3] Instead of following the conventional order of description from the feet upward, Devassia reverses the direction, portrayig Jesus from head to feet to emphasize the divine nature of Christ and situates Him within the iconographic and literary conventions used for gods in Sanskrit tradition.

It may appear that political and military sequences – so important in classical *mahākāvyas* – do not occupy a prominent position among the descriptions in *Kristubhāgavatam*. The examples of the most notable court epics, as well as the opinions of Sanskrit theoreticians, seem to confirm that the depictions of the envoy, council, march of an army, and battle are integral components of every *mahākāvya*. Before Daṇḍin, Bhāmaha (c. 6th–7th centuries) had already identified these components as four out of five phases of action (along with *nāyakābhyudaya*).[4] Rudraṭa (9th century), who devoted considerable attention

3 The regular *pādādikeśānta* mode of description has a few examples in classical *mahākāvyas* (for instance in *Kumārasambhava* 1.33-49) and frequently occurs in love poetry. See Lienhard, 1984, p. 173.

4 *Kāvyālaṃkāra* 1.20. To denote the phases of action Bhāmaha used the term *saṃdhi*s, "junctures."

to the role of descriptions in *mahākāvya* in his *Kāvyālaṃkāra* ("The Embellishment of Poetry"), also enumerates them in verses 16.11–12, 16, and 18. Bhāmaha, Daṇḍin, and Rudraṭa were not the only theoreticians to emphasize the role of politicaland military motives in the composition of a *mahākāvya*.[5] Nevertheless, *Kristubhāgavatam* does not contain any extended passages depicting military action, as such episodes are incongruent with the story of Christ. However, there is one episode that can be considered Devassia's attempt to include a political-military sequence into the work. The ninth *sarga*, titled "The Arrival of Sages and the Slaughter of the Innocents Perpetrated by Herod" (*vidvadāgamanaṃ herodakṛtaṃ śiśumāraṇaṃ ca*)[6] recounts the nativity narrative episode known from the Gospel of Matthew, in which the king of Judaea, Herod the Great[7] – threatened by the prophecy of a newborn king – orders the massacre of all male children under two years of age in and around Bethlehem. The episode apears only in the Gospel of Matthew; it is absent from the works of Nicolaus of Damascus, a confidant of Herod, as well as from *Antiquities of the Jews* by Titus Flavius Josephus, a first-century Roman-Jewish historian (Clarke, 2003, p. 22). Because of the lack of independent corroboration and the frequently challenged historical plausibility of the event,[8] the narrative is often considered a piece of folklore inspired by Herod's notorius reputation, especially since the Matthaean account closely resembles the episode from the Old Testament (Exodus 1:22), in which the Pharaoh orders the killing of all first-born Hebrew male children.

In *Kristubhāgavatam*, Devassia uses the story as the focal point of the ninth *sarga*, culminating in the description of the massacre, which can be considered a substitute for the depictions of a march of an army and battle characteristic of

5 For more definitions of *mahākāvya* proposed by the theoreticians and the role of descriptions see the studies of Trynkowska (2000 and 2004) or Peterson (2003).

6 All the translations in present article are mine. Devassia added an English translation to the edition of *Kristubhāgavatam*. However, as he admitted, it "is not always literal" (Devassia, 1977, p. 2). Moreover, the translation provided by the author often contains cursory explanations of the references to Indian culture that occur in the text. In order to convey the original meaning of the work and to keep the flow of the text without additional parentheses, I have decided to translate the relevant verses anew and supply them with a separate explanation whenever needed.

7 When it comes to the biblical names Devassia did not employ a homogenous mode; sometimes he used the phonetic equivalents or only slightly modified English variants of the names (see *heroda* for Herod or *malākya* for Malachi), the other times he Sanskritized the names a little bit more (e.g. *yosapha* for Joseph or *yeśu* for Jesus). In some cases, he completely changed the names (Claudia, the wife of Pilate, is called *kalāvatī*) or translated them to emphasize the meaning (Golgotha, "skull," is called *kapālagiri* or *kapālādgri*, "the mountain of the skull"). The variants of certain names (like *israyel*, *yisrayel*, or *yisrāyala* for Israel) are caused the most probably by the metrical requirements; sometimes the author uses shorter forms, sometimes longer.

8 See, for example, Maier, 1998, pp. 169–170, where the author presents the opinions of scholars who studied the historical probability of the described episode.

the classical *mahākāvya*s. The canto opens with the introduction of Herod as a cruel king who eliminates his enemies and potential threats (v. 9.1–2). In the following verses, the author reports the news brought to the ruler by his spies: the prophecy of the birth of a new king (v. 9.4–6). In verses 9.7–10, Devassia recalls an internal monologue of Herod, who feels threatened by the prophecy. The king sends out spies to search for the child. Meanwhile, three sages from the East visit the court in search of the new king. The audience with the ruler and the impressions of the sages are described in verses 9.17–19:

> By the side of the king, there was the specially summoned Annas, as well as the men learned in rituals (*Veda*) and astrology, [each sitting] according to the right place [17]. The sages perceived Herod as a great god in the royal council chamber of heaven, surrounded by a number of deities and [accompanied] by Bṛhaspati [18], but in the immediate proximity they saw him, the cruel-eyed bearer of the crown carrying the royal scepter, as Antaka holding a club [19].[9]

The description resembles portrayals of royal assemblies found in Sanskrit literature, where the king is depicted as seated on the throne surrounded by members of the court, including astrologers and Vedic scholars, often referred to as *vedavidyāvid* or *vedavid* ("learned in *Vedas*"). In the passage quoted above, the expression most probably denotes "men learned in rituals."[10] Although brief and only sketching the royal milieu, the excerpt contains a feature typical of such descriptions: the phrase "each according to the right place" (*yathāsthānam*) suggests the existence of a prescribed order governing the seating of the participants of the assembly. Devassia also used the opportunity to exploit some direct references to Indian culture: he compared Annas, the High Priest, to Bṛhaspati, a sage who counsels the gods, and Herod to Antaka ("the Ender"), the embodiment of Yama, the god of death. According to the Gospels, Annas was appointed the first High Priest of Judaea later. He is mentioned in the story of the trial of Jesus: Christ was brought to him for judgment before being brought to Pontius Pilate. The modification is an example of *licentia poetica*; Devassia made the description more specific – he "gave a face" to an anonymous counsellor who, in this version of the story, stood next to Herod like Bṛhaspati in the royal council chamber of heaven. Additionally,

9 *tatrāsīn nṛpateḥ pārśve saviśeṣaṃ nimantritaḥ |*
annāsaś ca yathāsthānaṃ vedajyotirvidas tathā ||
gurunā devavṛndaiś ca sudharmāyaṃ samāvṛtam |
mahendram iva herodaṃ vidvāṃsas te vyalokayan ||
rājadaṇḍadharaṃ krūradṛṣṭiṃ makuṭadhariṇam |
dadṛśus tam upānte te daṇḍahastam ivāntakam ||

10 Compare, for example, with the description of an assembly given by Dhanapāla in *Tilakamañjari* (see Pāṇḍuraṅga Paraba, 1938, pp. 107–108).

by comparing the king to Antaka, Devassia emphasized the cruelty of the ruler and completed the description by employing comparison.

In the following part of the canto, the author recalls the conversation between Herod and the sages, the council regarding the possible whereabouts of the "new-born king," the dispatch of the wise men who are asked to find the child and report it, their visit to Bethlehem, and the tribute to baby Jesus (v. 9.20–35). In verses 9.36–40, Devassia describes how Joseph, instructed by the angel (*dūta*, "messenger"), fled with the family to Egypt to protect the child from Herod. The fragment ends with an analogy to the story of Kṛṣṇa and Kaṃsa: "He led Jesus away, just like the father who by divine order took the child to the house of Nanda, to protect him from the danger of Kaṃsa."[11] It is not the first time in this canto that the author compared Herod to Kaṃsa; he had already done so in the opening verse of the *sarga*. According to tradition, Kaṃsa, an evil ruler of Mathura, after a heavenly voice prophesied that the eighth son of Devakī would slay him, ordered the killing of Devakī's children. Six of them died; the seventh, Balarāma, survived because he was transferred to the womb of Rohiṇī. The eighth child was Kṛṣṇa. To protect him from Kaṃsa, Devakī asked the boy's father, Vasudeva, to take him to Gokula, where Kṛṣṇa was raised by Nanda, the head of the cowherds. The similarities between the stories of Jesus and Kṛṣṇa are obvious. Devassia used the analogy to make the narrative more vibrant, to present the biblical episode through the lens of a famous motif from the mythology of Kṛṣṇa, to show the parallel between the Christian and Hindu traditions, and to juxtapose two divine figures from different cultures.

In the composition of *Kristubhāgavatam*, Devassia relied on the Gospels, tradition, and works such as *The Greatest Story Ever Told* by Fulton Oursler (Devassia, 1977, 1), where the episode of the massacre is briefly described. The account in the New Testament is only three verses long (Matthew 2:16–18):

> Then Herod, seeing that he was mocked by the Wise men, was full of wrath; and he sent, and slew all the male children that were in Bethlehem, and in all its borders, from two years old and under, according to the time which he had exactly learned from the Wise men.
>
> Then was fulfilled that which was spoken through Jeremiah the prophet, saying
>
> A voice was heard in Ramah,
> Weeping and great mourning,
> Rachel weeping for her children;
> And she would not be comforted,
> Because they are not (*s.e.*, 1913, p. 10).

11 *śiśuṃ kaṃsabhayāt trātuṃ divyādeśān nināya tam |*
yathā nandagṛhaṃ tātas tathā yeśum uvāha saḥ ||

The description given by Ourlser is even shorter:

> [The] captains had to go out of the palace and lead troops to Bethlehem to do his atrocious bidding. They surrounded the city, occupied the streets, rushed into the houses with drawn short swords and uplifted spears. By the order of the king, they cut to death every boy baby in the town. Not one of those holy innocents was spared – only the infant Jesus (Oursler, 1949, p. 69).

Devassia devoted seven stanzas (v. 9.41–47) to the episode, which provide more details:

> As soon as the king realized that he was being fooled by the sages, he burnt in rage and made a cruel resolution [41]. Alas, he immediately ordered the slaying of male children born in Bethlehem, two years old and younger [42]. On the following day, the town was filled with dreadful royal troops; the soldiers entered every house and slaughtered innocents [43]. Here, a soldier puts to the sword a boy in the cradle, elsewhere, he snatches another one by force from the mother's arms and cuts him into pieces [44]. The town, filled with the corpses of slaughtered children and the laments of mothers, was like a new hell settled for the king [45]. It was like a new consecration (*abhiṣeka*) of the cruel king, carried out with the rain of pure blood of unsullied children [46]. The king, the murderer of his wife, sons, elders, and children, surpassed in hard-heartedness even Kaṃsa, the ruler of Mathura [47].[12]

The first two stanzas could be considered a Sanskrit rendition of verse 2:16 from the Gospel of Matthew,[13] but Devassia continued the description and

12 *yadā bubodha bhūpas tair ātmanaṃ vañcitaṃ budhaiḥ |*
tadā jajvāla roṣeṇa cakre ca krūraniścayam ||
bethalehemasaṃjātān dvivayaskān sa puṃśiśūn |
tan nyūnavayasaś cāśu hantuṃ hanta samādiśat ||
paredyur nagarī ghorair āvṛtā rājasainikaiḥ |
gatvā pratigṛhaṃ yodhāś cakrur arbhakamāraṇam ||
kvacid dolāśayaṃ bālam asinā hanti sainikaḥ |
kvacid anyaṃ matṛhastād balād ākṛṣya kṛntati ||
hatabālakagātraiś ca janitrīṇāṃ prarodanaiḥ |
sā'bhūd iva purī rājñe narakaṃ nirmitaṃ navam ||
śiśūnām akṛtāghānām amalāsrapravarṣaṇāt |
nṛśaṃsabhūmipasyeva kṛtaṃ navyābhiṣecanam ||
jāyāputragurūṇāṃ ca śiśūnāṃ cāntako nṛpaḥ |
kaṃsam apy atiśete sma kraurye sa mathurādhipam ||

13 In other parts of the epic, the author rendered in Sanskrit the famous sayings of Christ and other meaningful quotes from the Gospels, as *Oratio Dominica* (v. 17.44-47) or such sayings like "it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God" (v. 21.49, after Matthew 19:24, Mark 10:25, Luke 18:25), "he that is without sin among

replaced the image of Jeremiah's vision recalled by the evangelist with a longer and more brutal depiction of the slaughter. He created a vision of a town overrun by the merciless troops sent by Herod. The description in the 45th verse brings to mind the poetic visions of a battlefield filled with corpses and laments of women. In the next verse, the author drew an analogy between the bloodbath at the site of the massacre and the royal *abhiṣeka*, the consecration ritual of the king. Using a simile, Devassia created a picture of Herod that can be imagined as bathed in the blood of the innocent victims of his cruelty. The vision is further emphasized by another juxtaposition of the king of Judaea with Kaṃsa and the reminder of Herod's murderous acts of killing his wife and sons. The choice of words additionally accentuates the violent aspect of the episode: the description of the slaughter abounds in many terms as *krūra*, "bloody" or "cruel" (v. 9.19 and 9.41), *ghora*, "violent" or "dreadful" (v. 9.43), *nṛśaṃsa*, "mischievous" or "cruel" (v. 9.46), *kraurya*, "cruelty" or "hard-heartedness" (v. 9.47), and *duṣkṛta*, "evil action" or "sin" (v. 9.48). The ninth canto culminates in verses 9.41–47; the following stanzas gradually lead through the falling action towards the *dénouement* of the *sarga*, which ends with the family of Jesus returning to Bethlehem.

The episode is an important thread of action in the first half of Devassia's work. A short biblical narrative mentioned only by one evangelist was developed and given greater prominence. Moreover, as noted before, the political and military character of the events recalled in the canto can be seen as the employment of three descriptive sequences recommended for *mahākāvya* by the theoreticians; although simplified and not as extensive as in the classical *mahākāvya*s, the ninth *sarga* includes descriptions of an envoy (the visit of the three sages at the court of Herod), a council (regarding the possible whereabouts of the "new-born king"), and military action (the attack of royal troops on Bethlehem). The latter is the most bloody and violent description in the work – paradoxically, even more so than the story of the crucifixion of Christ recalled in the 31st canto. The Slaughter of the Innocents is not the only episode from the Gospels elaborated by Devassia (for instance, he devoted the whole 29th canto to the description of the suicide of Judas), but in this case, the author used the opportunity to show his imagination and freedom as a poet to make full use of the requirements of *mahākāvya* genre.

In the Appreciations, Joseph Parecattil, Archbishop of Ernakulam, noted that he has no hesitation in saying that Devassia's work

> will certainly throw open the doors for those Sanyasins and other Sanskrit scholars, who usually do not go in for the life of Christ written in western languages,

you, let him first cast a stone" (v. 23.13, after John 8.7), or "My God, my God, why didst thou forsake me?" (v. 31.41, after Matthew 27:46, Mark 15:34).

> to have access to Christ in the idioms and expressions of a language with which they are familiar and which evokes in them an appreciative response (Devassia, 1977, p. xi).

The author of *Kristubhāgavatam* exploited all possible means to present the story of Christ in the form of a *mahākāvya* that is more approachable and relatable for the contemporary Indian reader, despite being written in Sanskrit, which is often considered a dead language. Devassia's work is one of many examples proving that literary production in Sanskrit has not ceased and the language remains alive, even if mostly as a medium of literary expression or academic interest.[14]

The theme of the epic and its language limit the readership mainly to circles of Sanskrit scholars and educated Indian Christians. Not coincidentally, in 1980, India's National Academy of Letters announced *Kristubhāgavatam* as the winner of the prestigious Sahitya Akademi Award for Sanskrit. However, as wished by the author, the work has also reached non-academic readers: even today, it is studied at Keralan universities, read during Christian celebrations, and quoted by members of the Church on social media.[15] Such a state of affairs is facilitated by the fact that *Kristubhāgavatam* was published along with the author's English translation. Although, as mentioned before, the translation is not always literal, it makes the work accessible for those who do not know Sanskrit or have only a basic knowledge of the language. In this way, *Kristubhāgavatam* can be

14 The belief that Sanskrit is a dead language and does not serve anymore as "the vehicle for living thought" (Pollock, 2001, p. 414) is widely accepted. Nevertheless, modern literature in this language proves otherwise, as it reacts to contemporary events, incorporates new themes and genres, and transforms according to social, political, and cultural changes. Moreover, the spoken Sanskrit courses gain more and more popularity, radio and television programs broadcast in this language, and a certain number of people claims that Sanskrit is their mother tongue used on a daily basis—in the latest census (2011), it was nearly 25 000 people (see the census tables published on the official website: https://censusindia.gov.in/census.website/data/census-tables). The matter of Sanskrit's liveliness is a complicated and interesting problem, unfortunately beyond the scope of this article. For more information please consult, for instance, Pollock, 2001 and Hanneder, 2002.

15 Based on the personal communication with Prof. C. Rajendran and Prof. G.U. Thite. The syllabuses of Sanskrit courses offered by several Indian universities and colleges prove that *Kristubhāgavatam* is a subject of academic studies; see, for instance, the syllabus of the MA Sanskrit course at the Calicut University (https://sde.uoc.ac.in/sites/default/files/sde_videos/IV%20Sem-SKT-Modern%20Literary%20Composition%20in%20Sanskrit.pdf) or the syllabus of the BA Sanskrit course at the University of Kerala (https://www.keralauniversity.ac.in/downloads/sdgg1669281193.pdf). The text of *Kristubhāgavatam* is used not only during the religious celebrations and for academic purposes but also as a literary source exploited by Indian Christians in other cultural activities, as exemplified by a performance conducted during the World Voice Day in Thrissur, on 15 April 2023, in which a choir presented a music composition with the lyrics from Devassia's poem (see Poovathingal, 2023).

appreciated by a wider audience. For Indian Christians, it is a significant work that brings together two important spheres of life; it embodies the essence of cultural and religious heritage – especially the first half of the epic, which fulfils this goal through concise descriptions and numerous comparisons to Indian culture. The second half is less descriptive and seems somewhat hastened; here, the descriptive sequences occur only sporadically, and the storyline is presented mainly through extended dialogues or monologues.[16]

Nevertheless, in general, Devassia managed to achieve his goal of composing a *mahākāvya* on the life of Christ. Whenever the story seemed incompatible with the requirements of the genre (as in the absence of miliary sequences), the author elaborated on minor biblical episodes in order to meet the theoretical stipulations. The work is endowed with the qualities (*guṇa*s) of clarity (*prasāda*) and agreeableness or tenderness (*saukumārya*); it is written in a lucid style, avoids rare and complex expressions, consists of words easy to pronounce, is grammatically correct, and presents even the most violent or unpleasant stories with elegance and particular tenderness. The treatment of the episode describing the slaughter of children shows how the author of *Kristubhāgavatam* adapted the story of Christ to the requirements of Sanskrit poetry and to the model of *mahākāvya*, demonstrating that even in the last decades of the 20th century Sanskrit was not a dead language but one that could still serve as a medium of literary expression.

Bibliography

Census of India tables. (2011). Retrieved from: https://censusindia.gov.in/census.website/data/census-tables (access: 26.08.2023).

Clarke, H. (2003). *The Gospel of Matthew and Its Readers: A Historical Introduction to the First Gospel*. Bloomington/Indianapolis: Indiana University Press.

Devassia, P.C. (1977). *Kristubhagavatam. A Mahakavya in Sanskrit Based on the Life of Jesus Christ*. Trivandrum: Jayabharatam.

Felix, W. (2014). *The Oxford Handbook of Christianity in Asia*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Hanneder, J. (2002). On "The Death of Sanskrit". *Indo-Iranian Journal*, vol. 45(4), 293–310.

Lienhard, S. (1984). *A history of classical poetry: Sanskrit-Pali-Prakrit*. Wiesbaden: Otto Harrassowitz.

16 There are a few exceptions to this general statement. In v. 28.13, for example, Devassia compares the relation between Christ and Judas to the betrayal of Mahatma Gandhi by Nathuram Godse, a Hindu nationalist and the assassin of Gandhi.

Maier, P.L. (1998). Herod and the Infants of Bethlehem. In: J. Vardaman (ed.), *Chronos, Kairos, Christos II: Chronological, Nativity, and Religious Studies in Memory of Ray Summers*. Macon: Mercer University Press.

Naganatha Sastry, P.V. (ed.). (1991). Kāvyālaṅkāra *of Bhāmaha*. Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass.

Oursler, F. (1949). *The Greatest Story Ever Told. A Tale of the Greatest Life Ever Lived*. New York: Doubleday and Company.

Panda, R.K. (ed.). (2008). Kāvyādarśaḥ *of Daṇḍin. Text with the commentary*. Delhi: Jibānand Vidyāsāgar/Bharatiya Kala Prakashan.

Pāṇḍuraṅga Paraba, K. (ed.). (1938). *The* Tilakamañjari *of Dhanapāla*. Bombay: Pandurang Jawaji.

Peterson, I.V. (2003). *Design and Rhetoric in a Sanskrit Court Epic. The* Kirātājunīya *of Bhāravi*. New York: State University of New York Press.

Pollock, S. (2001). The Death of Sanskrit. *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, vol. 44(2), 392–426.

Poovathingal, P. (2023). "World Voice Day". Facebook, April 16, 2023. Retrieved from: https://www.facebook.com/photo/?fbid=5694891937282764&set=a.995743173864354 (access: 26.08.2023).

S.e. (1913). *The New Testament of Our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ*. Philadelphia: American Baptist Publication Society.

Sukla, R. (ed.). (1966). Kāvyālaṅkāra *(A Treatise on Rhetoric) of Rudrata with The Sanskrit Commentary of Namisādhu*. Varanasi: Chowkhamba Vidyabhawan.

Syllabus of the BA Sanskrit course at the University of Kerala. (2022). Retrieved from: https://www.keralauniversity.ac.in/downloads/sdgg1669281193.pdf (access: 26.08.2023).

Syllabus of the MA Sanskrit course at the Calicut University. (2021). Retrieved from: https://sde.uoc.ac.in/sites/default/files/sde_videos/IV%20Sem-SKT-Modern%20Literary%20Composition%20in%20Sanskrit.pdf (access: 26.08.2023).

Trynkowska, A. (2000) Mallinātha and Classical Indian Theoreticians of Literature on Descriptions in the *Mahākāvya*. *Cracow Indological Studies*, vol. 2, 37–48.

Trynkowska, A. (2004). *Struktura opisów w „Zabiciu Śisiupali" Maghy. Analiza literacka sanskryckiego dworskiego poematu epickiego z VII w. n.e*. Warszawa: Uniwersytet Warszawski.

Hermina Cielas Leão – is a Sanskrit scholar affiliated with the Department of Languages and Cultures of India and South Asia, Jagiellonian University. Her research focuses on Sanskrit literature as well as the culture and art of India, including visual poetry, the performative tradition of *avadhāna*, and contemporary Sanskrit. Dr. Cielas Leão is the author of numerous scholarly articles and the monograph *Attentive Minds: A History of the Indian Performative Art of Avadhāna from the Origin to Modern Times* (Brill, 2024).