

## [Book Excerpt: The Wonder that Is Sanskrit](#)

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Book Excerpt

### The Wonder that Is Sanskrit

Exploring the astounding word plays and linguistic legerdemain of our poets

The following are excerpts from Chapter Ten, "Interesting and Amazing Creations in Sanskrit" of The Wonder that is Sanskrit, written by Sampadananda Mishra and Vijay Poddar and published by the Sri Aurobindo Society in 2006. This chapter can be found at [scr.bi/WonderSanskrit](http://scr.bi/WonderSanskrit); the book itself is unfortunately out of print.

#### Introduction

There is in Sanskrit a whole body of literature that is based on a play with the language. This is not great literature or inspired poetry, but more in the nature of linguistic acrobatics. These writings are often obtuse and not easy to understand because they require a great mastery over all the complex grammatical structures. Therefore, they are known as adhamakavyas, meaning "poems of a lower quality." However, far from being worthless, they demonstrate the amazing possibilities inherent in the language, along with the originality and creativity of the writers.

Several great poets, including Kalidasa, Bhartrihari, Magha and Sriharsha have made use of the adhamakavyas, sometimes even in their major works, in a spirit of playful indulgence. There are instances where entire epics have been written in this style. These are known as chitrakavyas and are part of the alankarashastra, or Sanskrit rhetorics. Some of the creations border on the unbelievable and would perhaps be impossible in any other language. Here we will look briefly at a few examples to enjoy their flavor and taste.

#### Varnachitras

The varnachitras are shlokas written with certain constraints on the use of









## Chitrabandhas

In the chitrabandhas, when the shloka is written out, the letters form interesting geometric patterns. Our last example in this category is exceptionally beautiful. It is based on a well-known problem in mathematics. The challenge is to place a knight in one corner of the chessboard and to cover all 64 squares with the knight, without landing on any square twice. The French mathematician Euler found the answer to this problem in the 17th century. This is why this is known as Euler's chess and knight problem.

In India, a manuscript called Padukasahasram has been found, written by a Tamil saint Shri Desikan, in which there are a thousand verses written in praise of the wooden sandals of Lord Rama. In one of the chapters the saint has written the verses in various chitrakavyas. In the example given here, there are two shlokas, one after the other. The syllables of the first shloka are written out in the squares on a chessboard. Then, beginning with the first syllable, if the second shloka is read among the letters of the first shloka, one finds that the letters follow the movement of the knight on the chessboard, giving simultaneously a solution to the chess-knight problem. In fact, the writing of the verses in this fashion is far more difficult than the original chess-knight problem. One is even more amazed when one realizes that the manuscript is of the 10th century and the saint lived 700 years before Euler [download the chapter file for a chart].

### Some Interesting Verses

The devotional movement in India gave rise to different types of poetic expressions. We end our chapter with two interesting anecdotes regarding king Bhoja, whose court-poet was Kalidasa. Bhoja was a great patron of Sanskrit and himself a poet. It was a common saying that in the kingdom of Bhoja, everyone was a poet. An ambassador from another kingdom happened to be there but said this was an exaggeration and was not possible. So he went out into the kingdom and far away found a poor weaver, working from morning to night to earn his living. He brought the weaver to the court and in front of the king asked him whether he could compose poetry. The weaver replied in all humility:

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