

20. The Scope of Aṣṭādaśavarṇana in the mahākāvya *Mathurābhyudaya* by Shankar Rajaraman

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Abstract:

This study examines the selective deployment of the traditional *aṣṭādaśavarṇana* (eighteen descriptive categories) in *Mathurābhyudaya*, an unpublished Sanskrit mahākāvya by the contemporary Sanskrit poet Shankar Rajaraman. Focusing on twelve varṇana tropes—*nagara* (city), *aṛṇava* (ocean), *śaila* (mountain), *ṛtu* (seasons), *candra* (moon), *arka* (sun), *madhupāna* (wine-drinking), *vipralambha* (love separation), *mantra* (ministerial counsel), *dūta* (embassy), *prayāṇa* (travel), and *āji* (battle)—the paper analyzes how their strategic employment shapes the narrative and aesthetic fabric of the epic. Through close textual analysis, it reveals how these descriptive frameworks deepen the portrayal of Kṛṣṇa's progression from pastoral simplicity to city's grandeur, intertwining natural imagery, emotional nuance, and dramatic tension. This selective and discerning engagement highlights the poet's creative adaptation of classical kāvya conventions and offers novel insights into the dynamics of form and meaning in contemporary Sanskrit mahākāvya.

Keywords: *Mathurābhyudaya*, *aṣṭādaśavarṇana*, *Sanskrit mahākāvya*, *Kṛṣṇa*, *Sanskrit poetics*, *Shankar Rajaraman*, *Kāmsavadha*

Introduction

Mathurābhyudaya is an unpublished Sanskrit mahākāvya composed by a contemporary poet, which narrates Kṛṣṇa's transformative journey from the pastoral simplicity of Gokula to the urban grandeur of Mathurā. Central to this epic's poetic architecture is the traditional framework of

*aṣṭādaśavarṇana*¹, incorporating eighteen descriptive tropes conventionally used in classical Sanskrit kāvya. This paper discusses twelve of these varṇanas—*nagara* (city), *arṇava* (ocean), *śaila* (mountain), *ṛtu* (seasons), *candra* (moon), *arka* (sun), *madhupāna* (wine-drinking), *vipralambha* (love separation), *mantra* (ministerial counsel), *dūta* (embassy), *prayāṇa* (travel), and *āji* (battle) — that are employed in *Mathurābhyudaya*. Five of the other six *varṇanas* namely, *udyāna* (garden), *salila-krīḍā* (water-sport), *madanotsava* (madana-festival), *vivāha* (marriage), and *kumārodāya* (birth of princes) do not figure in this mahākāvya because they are inconsequential to the narrative. *Nāyakābhyudaya* — the hero's triumph — is the summum bonum of the mahākāvya that is realized by Kṛṣṇa through his slaying of the elephant Kuvalayāpīḍa first and then, of the wrestler Cāṇūra and the tyrant king Kaṁsa. The employment of descriptive tropes in accordance with the demands of the narrative reflects the poet's adherence to propriety (*aucitya*) of plot as per indicated by a commentator on Daṇḍi's *Kāvyaḍarśa* (1.19²), prioritizing thematic relevance to the Kaṁsavadha narrative over superfluous description. This selective usage exemplifies the poet's skill in adapting classical conventions to serve the thematic and narrative demands of the epic, crafting a focused and emotionally resonant portrayal of Kṛṣṇa, from a rustic cowherd to divine protector-wrestler.

Beyond its formal deployment of the *aṣṭādaśavarṇana*, *Mathurābhyudaya* is significant as a contemporary Sanskrit mahākāvya that reinvigorates the epic portrayal of Kṛṣṇa by interweaving spiritual, philosophical, and heroic themes in ways that resonate with modern poetic sensibilities. Its narrative innovation and thematic depth offer fresh perspectives on the continuing vitality of the Sanskrit epic tradition.

1. नगरार्णवशैलातुर्चन्द्रार्कोदयवर्णनैः।उद्यानसलिलक्रीडामधुपानरतोत्सवैः॥
विप्रलम्भैर्विवाहैश्चकुमारोदयवर्णनैः।मन्त्रदूतप्रयाणाजिनायकाभ्युदयैरपि॥ (Kāvyaḍarśa 1.16-17)
2. न्यूनमप्यत्रयैःकैश्चिदङ्गैःकाव्यंनदुष्यति।1.20 (Kāvyaḍarśa of Daṇḍin)
अयं भावःनगर्यादिवर्णनं रसपरिपोषाय। सचेत्परिपोषः शैलवर्णनेनैव स्यात् तर्हि नगर्यादिवर्णनम् किञ्चित्करमिति। (Commentary on the above by Rangacharya Raddi Shastri)

Shankar Rajaraman (b. 1976), an accomplished *Kavi* and an *Aṣṭāvadhāni* from Bengaluru, Karnataka, brings a rare blend of classical and contemporary sensibilities to *Mathurābhyudaya*. Holding advanced degrees in Medicine, Psychiatry, Psychology, and Sanskrit, Shankar is a prolific poet and translator, with works such as *Bhārāvatarastava*, *Citranaīśadham*, and translations of *Kokila Sandeśa* and *Madhurāvijaya*. His poetry, often reflects the influences of Kālidāsa's clarity and *prasāda guṇa*, Abhinanda's measured *svabhāvokti*, Vedānta Deśika's balanced explicitness, and Gangādevī's śabdamaḍhurya. A recipient of the 2019 Maharshi Badrayan Vyas Samman, Shankar's innovative engagement with Sanskrit poetics positions *Mathurābhyudaya* as a pinnacle of modern mahākāvya composition³.

Despite the *aṣṭādaśavarṇana*'s central role in kāvya poetics since ancient times, focused scholarly analysis of how these varṇanas are selectively employed in individual works—particularly in unpublished or contemporary Sanskrit mahākāvyas—remains surprisingly limited. *Mathurābhyudaya*, as a contemporary composition engaging with this classical heritage, offers a valuable case study to examine how traditional poetic frameworks are adapted to new thematic and narrative contexts. The poet's deliberate selection of twelve out of the eighteen varṇanas reveals a nuanced creative strategy, emphasizing certain emotional and symbolic registers aligned with the epic's central concern: the spiritual and societal upliftment of the people of Mathurā. This selective use not only exemplifies innovation within tradition but also reflects contemporary Sanskrit literary practices that balance reverence for canonical forms with fresh artistic expression.

3. The poet acknowledge these influences in the colophon of his yet-to-be-published khaṇḍa-kāvya

Rāmānuyātram: इति श्रीकालिदासैकदासेन श्रीमदभिन्दाभिनन्दिना श्रीत्रय्यन्तदेशिकवचोऽनुवर्तनदीक्षितेन कल्याणपुरवासिना चिन्ताकविना शङ्करेण रचितं रामानुयात्रं नामखण्डकाव्यं समाप्तम्।

By exploring *Mathurābhyudaya*'s varṇana deployment, this paper contributes to the understanding of the *aṣṭādaśavarṇana* as a living and adaptable literary device and to broader conversations on how Sanskrit mahākāvya evolves in the modern era. It underscores the importance of studying unpublished and lesser-known works to expand the scholarly horizon beyond classical and canonical texts, opening new avenues for research in Sanskrit poetics and literary history.

Despite the long-standing tradition of the *aṣṭādaśavarṇana* in Sanskrit literature, there remains a surprising scarcity of dedicated scholarly study on this convention. By analyzing the instances of these twelve varṇanas within *Mathurābhyudaya*, this paper aims to illuminate how the poet employs descriptive conventions to enhance narrative depth, emotional nuance, and dramatic tension for the Kaṁsavadhā narrative. The study thereby contributes fresh insights into the dynamic interplay between form and meaning in Sanskrit mahākāvya, while also shedding light on the creative possibilities within contemporary Sanskrit literary production.

Methodology: This study employs close textual analysis of *Mathurābhyudaya* against Daṇḍin's *Kāvyaḍarśa* to examine the use of the *aṣṭādaśavarṇana* framework. The primary source is the unpublished manuscript, sourced directly from the poet and available for scholarly review upon request, with select verses included in footnotes for accessibility. Despite the *aṣṭādaśavarṇana*'s importance in Sanskrit mahākāvya, no prior study has systematically analyzed its application in a single work, especially in contemporary contexts. This gap, coupled with limited scholarship on modern Sanskrit literature compared to classical texts like *Raghuvamśa*, highlights the need to study *Mathurābhyudaya* as a modern adaptation of traditional forms.

Literature Review:

The *aṣṭādaśavarṇana*, a framework of eighteen descriptive categories in Sanskrit mahākāvya, is noted in treatises like *Kāvyaḍarśa*

for enhancing narrative imagery and emotion. However, scholarly focus on their selective use in individual works, particularly contemporary ones, is limited. Most studies address classical mahākāvya (5th–13th centuries CE), such as Raghuvamśa and Kirātārjunīya, with little attention to modern or unpublished texts. The selective application of varṇanas remains underexplored. This paper fills this gap by analyzing the twelve varṇanas used in Mathurābhyudaya, offering insights into its innovative adaptation of traditional poetics. Detailed analyses of each varṇana connect their thematic and aesthetic roles to the epic’s narrative, contributing to broader discussions on the evolution of Sanskrit literary practices.

Varṇanas not spotlighted:

The selective use of specific varṇanas in Mathurābhyudaya aligns with the principle of aucitya (propriety) which is essential for narrative coherence. Varṇanas such as *udyāna* (garden), *salila-krīḍā* (water-sport), *madanotsava* (madana-festival), *vivāha* (married separation), and *kumārodaya* (birth of princes) are not spotlighted in order to strategically maintain focus on Kṛṣṇa’s transition from pastoral simplicity to divine heroism in the Kāmsavadha narrative. However, they do creep occasionally into the narrative tangentially. For example, the verse 3.15⁴ alludes to *udyāna-s* (gardens) in the context of describing the city’s landscape. *Madanotsava* and *vivāha* are avoided by the poet because they are not part and parcel of the narrative and could unnecessarily shift the attention of the readers to romantic or domestic themes. *Kumārodaya* is irrelevant, as the narrative centers on Kṛṣṇa’s mature heroism rather than his birth. As already described, *nāyakābhyudaya* is the very outcome of Kṛṣṇa’s journey to Mathurā and his ultimate triumph over Kāmsa. By sidelining these varṇanas, the poet avoids narrative redundancy and an “obsession” with completeness, ensuring that each descriptive category serves the

4. क्षणमिह विहरध्वमध्वनीना इति मधुपध्वनिलीलया ब्रुवाणैः।

प्रसभमुपवनैरितस्ततश्च प्रतिहतसूर्यमरीचिवीचिकासु॥15॥

epic's thematic and aesthetic goals of portraying Kṛṣṇa's spiritual and heroic transformation .

Analysis of Selected Varnanas

1. नगरम्(City)

The *nagaravarṇana* in *Mathurābhyudaya* operates not merely as scenic description but as a metaphorical canvas for Kṛṣṇa's psychological and spiritual transformation. As the protagonist moves from the pastoral environs of Gokula to the sophisticated urban landscape of Mathurā, the poet employs a series of carefully structured images to mark this transition. In verse 3.11⁵, the shift in physical environment is likened to a young girl's emergence into adulthood: "As the chariot moved from the villages toward the city, the landscape changed gradually, like fresh youth unfolding from the innocence of a young maiden." This simile subtly mirrors Kṛṣṇa's own transition—from playful cowherd to divinely ordained hero—suggesting a maturation that is both spatial and emotional. Verses (3.12⁶–3.13⁷) further articulate this transformation through sensory contrasts. The rural auditory landscape—"the sweet sound of bangled hands pounding grain"—fades as tall buildings rise, and gold ornaments outshine the simple lotus-fiber adornments. These verses mark not only a change in physical setting but also a shift in values and tone, from the intimate rhythms of village life to the grandeur and complexity of royal power. Thus, the city is more than a backdrop—it is a narrative threshold. Through this *varṇana*, the poet positions Mathurā as a site of heightened tension and divine purpose, where rustic innocence gives way to cosmic confrontation. In the first ten verses

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5. अथ चलति रथे विहाय पल्लीरभिनगरि क्षितिस्त्रयथेव जाता।
नवतरुणवयोविलासलक्ष्मीविघटितमौग्ध्यगुणा वधूटिकेव॥11॥
 6. विरलविरलपर्णशालिकासु प्रतिपदमुत्थितसौधमालिकासु।
प्रमुषितमुसलावपातलीलाकलवलयोज्वलबाहुनालिकासु॥12॥
 7. कनकमणिललामधामदूर्गलपितबिसाङ्कुरभूषणच्छटासु।
त्रुटितसरलताकथासु नृणां भणितिशतैरुपचारचारुबन्धैः॥13॥

of the next sarga, the poet describes the various facets of Mathurā through the eyes of Kṛṣṇa and Balarāma and in the process brings out the difference in their outlook towards life itself. The *nagaravarṇana* therefore functions both structurally and symbolically, foregrounding the epic's thematic concern with transformation, identity, and destiny.

2. अर्णवः (Ocean)

There is no one section in this mahākāvya that is particularly devoted to the description of the ocean. However, the ocean serves the purpose of a metaphor in some places and in one case, is described as part of the description of early morning. The *arṇavavarṇana* in *Mathurābhyudaya* functions as a recurring metaphor that evokes divine power, cosmic scale, and narrative magnitude. Far from being a mere descriptive flourish, the ocean imagery serves to deepen the poem's mythic resonance, situating Kṛṣṇa's actions within a larger metaphysical and universal framework. In verse 2.32⁸, Kṛṣṇa's valor is equated to an ocean with the Sudarśana discus appearing therein like a whirlpool; the Asura army trembles momentarily like a boat when it encounters this whirlpool, only to be engulfed by it the next moment. This metaphor transforms the battlefield into a marine expanse, and Kṛṣṇa into a boundless force of nature—expansive, overwhelming, and inexorable. In verse 4.44⁹, the city of Mathurā is likened to earth itself - its suburbs resembling continents and the lakes surrounding it akin to the oceans girdling the earth. This framing elevates the city's symbolic importance while simultaneously casting it as besieged, in need of Kṛṣṇa's protection. The imagery amplifies the tension between the terrestrial and

8. सुदर्शनावर्तसनाथमीडेभुजप्रतापार्णवमस्य भूयः।

रक्षश्चूर्नश्यति यत्र नौका प्रकाश्य पारिप्लवतां मुहूर्तम्॥32॥

9. नानार्थश्लाघ्यशाखानगरमयमहाद्वीपदीप्रावकाशां

कासाराम्भोधिकूलोच्छलितजलकणोद्गामसीमाभिरामाम्।

पृथ्वीमेवाशशङ्के पुरमसुरभरातङ्घसङ्घोचितङ्गी

मग्नेदेवोदयावान्निजभुजमहसारक्षणीयांमुरारिः॥44॥

the divine, the vulnerable and the omnipotent. Finally, in verse 8.16¹⁰, the poet stages the ocean as a participant in the nocturnal drama: “The ocean seemed to perform a midnight play with dancing waves... stars departed like an audience on the onset of dawn when the play came to an end.” Here, the natural world aligns itself with the unfolding epic, lending a cosmic aesthetic to the narrative’s emotional and spiritual stakes. Through these episodes, the *arṇavavarṇana* accomplishes more than atmospheric embellishment—it articulates Kṛṣṇa’s transcendence and the epic’s gravitas. The ocean becomes a poetic vehicle through which the poem invokes awe, dramatizes power, and magnifies its theological vision.

3. शैलः (Mountain)

Mountains, like oceans, are not described as a regular trope in *Mathurābhyudaya*. The *śailavarṇana* functions on dual planes: as physical topography and as a reflective mirror of the protagonist’s emotional landscape. Mountains in this epic are not passive features of the setting but dynamic agents that reveal, contrast, or soothe inner states, especially those of Kṛṣṇa. In verses 1.29¹¹–1.30¹², the poet juxtaposes the distant, unmoving hardness of mountains with the softness and vulnerability of human hearts, suggesting that inanimate nature may appear more stoic than sentient beings. This contrast heightens the poignancy of Kṛṣṇa’s sorrow and emotional struggle, subtly emphasizing his empathy and emotional complexity. The image of mountain streams gently washing Kṛṣṇa’s face operates on a symbolic register as well—it is as if nature itself seeks to console him. The tactile softness of the streams becomes a metaphor for

10. सुचिरे प्रयोग इव याति निशीथे जलराशिरङ्घ्रमुखरोर्मिनटेऽन्तम्।
अगमन्नधिष्ठितपरस्परपृष्ठं प्रतिपन्नपारिषदरीतय ऋक्षाः॥16॥
11. पाषाणकठिना दूरे तेनालक्षि गिरिच्छटा।
सुमनोदुर्बलं पुंसामशोचि हृदयं पुनः॥29॥
12. क्वापि शैलशिरः पाती निर्झरन्नुटितोऽश्मसु।
ममार्ज शीकरासारैस्तस्य चिन्ताविलं मुखम्॥30॥

emotional succor, underscoring the reciprocity between the external world and Kṛṣṇa's inner experience. Thus, the śailavarṇana functions as a site of emotional projection and resolution, transforming landscape description into an exploration of psychological states. The mountains, enduring and vast, provide a stage upon which the tension between divine mission and human feeling is played out.

4. ऋतुः (Seasons)

The *ṛtuvarṇana* in *Mathurābhyudaya* serves not merely as a decorative device but as a poetic strategy to align shifts in season with emotional, dramatic, and narrative developments. Śarad (autumn) in verse 1.33¹³ marks Kṛṣṇa's departure from Gokula. The paddy fields "bend their heads," unable to bear his mental agitation. Nature itself is drawn into the emotional register of the scene, with the fields acting almost as sentient beings reflecting the sorrow of parting. Verse 4.43¹⁴ introduces *vasanta* (spring) as Kṛṣṇa and Balarāma walk through the streets of Mathurā: "Kṛṣṇa accompanied by Balrāma, moved through the streets of Mathurā like spring, accompanied by the Malaya breeze, through woods, as the citizens joyously welcomed them like sylvan deities, the latter". Here, *ṛtu* becomes a metaphor for renewal and auspiciousness. In verse 5.29¹⁵, the summer becomes a metaphor to describe Kṛṣṇa's benevolent encounter with Kubjā. The touch of Kṛṣṇa's hand melts away Kubjā's hunch like the touch of the sun's rays melting away the forest's snow. This episode enriches the seasonal palette of the poem, allowing *grīṣma* to participate in the emotional

13. उपेन्द्रमुत्थितक्षोभमुदीक्षितुमिवाक्षमाः।
आसन्नध्वगते क्षेत्रे शालयो नतमौलयः॥13॥
14. पुरसरणीषु सञ्चरति सीरिसखे सरसीरुहेक्षणे
सहमलयानिले विपिनवीथिषु चैत्र इवात्तविभ्रमम्।
प्रजगदुरित्यकृत्रिमवचःक्रमकलृप्तचमत्कृति प्रजाः
प्रकटितकौतुकप्रणयनिर्वृतयो वनदेवता यथा॥43॥
15. जगृहे विलीनघनपीनगडुतुहिनगण्डया तथा।
माधवस्य महिमातिशयाद्विपिनश्रियेव नवरूपनैपुणी॥29॥

symbolism of the epic. Together, these verses show how seasonal imagery is used not just for environmental texture but to mirror and magnify the epic's emotional currents and the hero's evolving relationships with the world around him.

5. चन्द्रः (Moon)

The *candravarṇana* in the *Mathurābhyudaya* is woven into Kṛṣṇa's divine aura, with moon imagery serving as a metaphor for his inner radiance, compassion, and sattvic nature. In verse 2.38¹⁶, the poet writes, “it is because he opens his eyes—the sun and moon—that living beings can visualise this world.” Here, the moon is not merely a celestial body but becomes one of Kṛṣṇa's eyes, endowing the universe with perceptibility and grace. The moon, thus, becomes a signifier of his benevolent gaze—gentle, illuminating, and life-affirming. In verse 3.36¹⁷, the nightly hour is imagined as addressing Kṛṣṇa directly: “I am not of the nature of *tamas* (darkness/delusion) like the demons are”. As if to prove this to Kṛṣṇa the night manifested its *sattva* *guṇa* through the first ray of the rising moon. The poet here takes recourse to the Sanskrit literary convention of representing the *guṇas* of *sattva* and *tamas* with the white and black colours respectively. Moonlight, in this verse, becomes symbolic of virtue and divine purity.

6. अर्कः (Sun)

The *arkavarṇana* in the *Mathurābhyudaya* employs solar imagery to articulate themes of temporal movement, emotional conflict, and divine immanence. The sun, as a cosmic timekeeper, becomes a narrative device through which the epic traces Kṛṣṇa's journey—both external and internal. In verse 1.3¹⁸, the poet writes, “Even though the Sun weighted upon him with the friendly gift of a fresh dawn, Kṛṣṇa's mind still lingered on the

16. असौ यदुन्मीलयति स्वकीये विलोचने सूर्यसुधामरीची।
भूतानि तद्वीक्षितुमुत्सहन्ते पितामहोपज्ञमिमं प्रपञ्चम्॥38॥
17. न खलु मयि तमस्तथा यथान्तर्दनुजनुषामिति साधयन्निशीथः।
प्रथमशशिकरच्छलाद्विवत्रे निजमथ सत्त्वगुणं मुरान्तकाय॥36॥
18. मित्रे करगृहीताहःप्राभृतेऽप्युदितेहरिः।
राधासम्भोगरात्रिभ्यो निर्ययौ न चिराद्बहिः॥3॥

nights which he had spent with Rādhā” The rising sun marks the onset of worldly duties, yet Kṛṣṇa’s delay in departing underscores his emotional entanglement and hesitation to leave the familiar world of love. The contrast between solar punctuality and Kṛṣṇa’s lingering dramatizes the pull between dharma and kāma, between duty and affection. Verse 1.36¹⁹ observes, “Akrūra’s and the sun’s chariots crossed half the road,” creating a visual and temporal parallel. The sun’s daily trajectory is mirrored in Kṛṣṇa’s journey to Mathurā, thus aligning cosmic rhythm with human progression. This moment places Kṛṣṇa’s movement within the temporal order of the universe, rendering his journey not only heroic but cosmically ordained. In verse 1.38²⁰, the poet offers a metaphysical reflection: “The (fierce, midday) Sun could not be glanced in the sky, like Parameśvara in the heart, though they both illuminate the entire universe.” This line invites a Vedāntic reading—where the sun, though visibly absent, remains present through its unseen influence, just as the divine pervades the inner self without manifest form. The solar image here transcends physical description and becomes an emblem of Kṛṣṇa’s divine omnipresence, merging natural light with spiritual luminosity. These verses together position the sun not merely as a backdrop but as a dynamic participant in the epic’s progression—its cyclical motion reflecting and enhancing the phases of Kṛṣṇa’s transformation. The *arka-varṇana*, therefore, serves as both a poetic and philosophical device, linking the external world to the protagonist’s internal evolution.

7. मधुपानम् (Alcohol-Drinking)

In *Mathurābhyudaya*, the *madhupānavarṇana* subverts traditional tropes by using intoxication imagery to highlight Kamsa’s moral decay

19. अक्रूरस्येव सूरस्य त्वरमाणतुरङ्गमम्।

अथोदलङ्घयद्यानं यातव्यस्यार्धमध्वनः॥३६॥

20. पूषा प्रकाशिताशेषपदार्थप्रकरोऽपि सन्।

अस्थाद्रयोन्नि दुरालोको हृदीव परमेश्वरः॥३८॥

rather than celebratory revelry. Verse 6.1²¹ depicts, “At night, Kamsa, on the rooftop, drank wine to become doubly intoxicated,” emphasizing his deepening isolation and spiritual corruption. This nocturnal scene contrasts the clarity and purpose found in Kṛṣṇa’s actions, portraying Kamsa’s withdrawal into self-destructive indulgence. In verse 6.2²², the poet likens Kamsa’s ever-filled cup to a sinful mind: “His cup... never emptied, like a wicked mind full of sin.” The perpetual fullness symbolizes an insatiable and toxic craving, underscoring the moral rot festering within him. Verse 6.3²³ states, “No virtuous advice entered him; only streams of liquor flowed,” reinforcing the total collapse of ethical restraint. The continuous flow of liquor serves as a metaphor for the unceasing influence of vice over Kamsa’s will. Together, these verses employ intoxication as a powerful metaphor for Kamsa’s spiritual downfall, thereby sharpening the thematic contrast with Kṛṣṇa’s path of righteousness and divine mission.

8. विप्रलम्भः (Love Separation)

The *vipralambhavarṇana* in *Mathurābhyudaya* weaves Kṛṣṇa’s epic journey with a poignant thread of longing and separation from Rādhā and the gopīs. In verse 1.3 (quoted earlier), employing a śleṣa (double entendre), the poet writes, “Even though the Sun weighted upon him with the friendly gift of a fresh dawn in his ray-hands, Kṛṣṇa’s mind still lingered on the nights which he had spent with Rādhā,” framing separation as a quiet ache underlying his divine mission. This subtle tension between duty and desire

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21. रात्रावत्रान्तरे कंसो हर्म्यपृष्ठमधिष्ठितः।
पपौ मधु मदान्धत्वं द्विरुक्तयितुमात्मनः॥१॥
22. पूर्यमाणं प्रतिमुहुर्मधुना तस्य भाजनम्।
बभूव न मनाग्रिक्तं खलस्येव मनोऽहसा ॥२॥
23. साधूनामुपदेशस्य कणोऽपि न यमाविशत्।
अन्तस्तस्यैव भोजस्य सुरास्रोतांस्यवातरन् ॥३॥

colors the narrative with emotional depth. Verse 1.7²⁴ intensifies this mood: “Though much was heard and spoken with the gopīs, much remained unheard and unspoken... he despaired,” revealing unspoken feelings and the weight of unfulfilled longing in Kṛṣṇa’s heart. In verse 1.12²⁵, “Kṛṣṇa was so captivated by a woman’s song of Rādhā’s love, he felt he had momentarily alighted from the moving chariot only to listen to it”. Kṛṣṇa is momentarily transported by the memory of Rādhā, highlighting how deeply separation permeates his consciousness. Together, these verses position separation not as mere absence but as a soft, persistent undertone—enriching Kṛṣṇa’s divine journey with the texture of human emotion and desire.

9. मन्त्रम् (Minister Counsel)

The *mantravarṇana* in *Mathurābhyudaya* unfolds as a calculated darkness opposing Kṛṣṇa’s advance. In verse 7.10²⁶, Kamsa’s ministers—disguised as friends but truly embodying *kāma* and other *ariṣaḍvargas*—plot deceit. Verse 7.11²⁷ shows Kamsa facing their fierce forms, and in 7.12²⁸, *kāma* is personified with dark brows and red eyes, scheming to disturb the world. From 7.13–7.50, each *ariṣaḍvarga*—*kāma*, *krodha*, *moha*, *lobha*, *mātsarya*, *mada*—From 7.13 to 7.50, each *ariṣaḍvarga* delivers

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24. बहु श्रुत्वापि भाषित्वाप्याभीरिर्घोषनिर्गमे।
श्रोतव्यभाषितव्येषु सशेषो विषसाद सः॥
25. क्वचित्कलमकण्डन्या राधाप्रेमार्थगर्भितम्।
अशृणोदुन्मना गीतं सोऽवतीर्थेव यानतः॥12॥
26. तेनाविष्कृतकुमुदाच्छकीर्तिभूमना कृष्णेन व्यथितमनेहसा नरेन्द्रम्।
आसीदन्नधिगतयातुविग्रहास्ते कामाद्या अथ रिपवोऽपदिश्य मैत्रीम्॥10॥
27. दृष्ट्वा तान्किमपि जगद्विभीषिकाया मर्मेव प्रकटयतो वपुर्भिरुग्रैः।
षाड्गुण्योपचितममंस्त भोजभर्ता हिंसाया निजविजयोपयोगि तन्त्रम्॥11॥
28. भ्रूव्याजादितरगुणद्वयाभिभूत्यै बिभ्राणस्तम इव मध्यतो विभक्तम्।
विश्वोपप्लवपरिभावनाविनिद्रश्चक्षुर्भ्यामत इव शोणिमानमृच्छन्॥12॥

delusive counsel: kāma thrills in subverting dharma (7.14²⁹), krodha urges violence (7.20³⁰), moha blames fate (7.26³¹), lobha mocks Kṛṣṇa (7.33³²), mātsarya envisions his destruction (7.38³³), and mada glorifies the elephant Kuvalayāpīḍa (7.48³⁴), ending in Kamsa’s brief confidence (7.50³⁵). In 10.20–10.48, his wives Asti and Prāpti extend this *mantra*: Asti’s loyalty and its limits with the wine refusal and Prāpti’s clear-headed plan invoking deceit and strategic action. Asti, in verse 10.20³⁶, declares, “O beloved, in my heart, there is a thought I cannot hide... from you, the lord of my heart,” using loyalty to steer Kamsa’s focus. Her counsel in verses 10.21–10.34 bolsters his pride, minimizing Kṛṣṇa’s threat—calling losses “two drops of water from the ocean” (10.24³⁷)—but her push for *madhu* (liquor)

29. धर्माधःकरणरसादहीयमानादङ्गेऽङ्गे परिणतनित्यरोमहर्षः।
अभ्यर्णस्थितमथ भूभुजं प्रणम्य प्रावोचद्विरचितचाटुकर्म कामः॥14॥
30. विद्यस्त्वद्भुनुरधुना विभो विभग्नं म्लानिस्ते पुनरियमीदृशी न युक्ता।
वीराणां प्रभवति केवलो भुजोष्मा बाह्यार्थैः किमुपनतैः स्थितैर्गतेर्वा॥20॥
31. ध्वस्तारेस्तव यदभून्न संस्तवाय त्वद्दीप्ता जगति यदस्पृशन्न केचित्।
यच्छीर्णं प्रकटमुपेक्षया धनुस्तद्रोपालो व्यधृत करे व्यभिनत कालः॥26॥
32. क्रीडादिविजयविधौ सखिप्रयुक्तं प्रामाण्यस्थितिमधिरोप्य वीरशब्दम्।
आभीरो यदि सपदि व्यनक्ति वैरं भोजेन्द्रेऽप्यहह कलिर्युगोऽवतीर्णः॥33॥
33. ग्रामीणो मुहुरधुना प्रवर्तते यस्त्वन्निद्रापनयनसाहसाय रात्रौ।
श्रो निद्रामहनि चिरन्तनीं प्रयास्यन्नो द्रष्टा जगति स जातु रात्रिमन्याम्॥38॥
34. एतस्मिञ्जितमेदिनीभृति वपुर्धाम्ना विभो त्वन्निभे
विस्रम्भस्तव कुञ्जरे कुवलयापीडे पुरो जुम्भताम्।
संरम्भस्तदनु प्रसृत्वरमदावेशक्रियाविर्भव-
न्नानाकारविकारबन्धुरहितच्छेदाय नेदीयसे॥48॥
35. राजस्तावत्तथेति स्थिरमभिदधतोऽन्तर्दधुस्ते पुरस्ता-
त्पड्यातुच्छञ्जलीलापरिणतवपुषो विद्विषस्तुल्यकालम्।
मेण्ठे सोऽप्यर्पिताज्ञस्त्वरितमथ हठोत्थापनादूरदुःस्थे
दन्तीन्द्रान्दोलितान्दूध्वनिसुखमनयन्निद्रया रात्रिशेषम्॥50॥
36. तमुवाच ततोऽस्तिरस्ति मे हृदये किञ्चन कान्त चिन्तनम्।
भवतो हृदयेश्वरात्र यत्क्षणमप्यर्हति गोपनक्रियाम्॥20॥
37. इदमक्षतरत्नसम्पदो जलबिन्दुद्वयहानिरम्बुधेः।
धनुषा करिणा च केनचित्तव यद्भोजविभो वियोजनम्॥24॥

in verse 10.34³⁸ falters as Kamsa refuses to drink (10.35³⁹), revealing her plan's limits. Prāpti, in verses 10.36–10.48, offers clarity: “I shall speak only what is appropriate, visible, and actionable” (10.37⁴⁰). She likens Kṛṣṇa's rise to “a disease with an undetermined cause” (10.43⁴¹), advocating *chala* (deceit) against a formidable foe (10.46–10.47)⁴², her plan loosening “the noose around his neck” (10.48⁴³) and restoring Kamsa's resolve. Thus, *mantra varṇana* unfolds as a dramatic stage of delusion and tension, casting Kamsa's court in stark contrast to Kṛṣṇa's dharmic path.

10. दूतः (Embassy)

The *dūtavarṇana* in *Mathurābhyudaya* introduces diplomatic tension cloaked in civility, marking a crucial moment of veiled confrontation between Kamsa and Kṛṣṇa. In verse 11.12⁴⁴, as Akrura, Balarāma, and

38. इति गामभिमानबोधिनीं प्रथयित्वा परिणेतुरग्रतः।
सुदती मदिरामुपाहरत्सरुजस्तस्य विनोदनेच्छया॥34॥
39. स तथापितमग्रहीन्नृपो मधुपात्रं मधु नापिबत्पुनः ।
क्षणिके हि कृशादरो भवत्युपचारे चिरदुर्मना जनः ॥35॥
40. भगिनी प्रियसत्यमब्रवीद्रमण त्वद्गुणवर्णनोद्यता।
हितमात्रमहं ब्रुवेऽधुना सविशेषव्यवसायगोचरम्॥37॥
41. स तु गूढगतिर्दिनाद्दिनं भवता विप्रकृतोऽपि वर्धते।
अविनिश्चितहेतुरामयो भिषजा नीत इवोपचार्यताम्॥43॥
42. भवतुच्छलबन्धुरुद्यमस्तव तुच्छेतरशोचिषि द्विषि।
त्रियते समवीर्ययोर्द्वयोश्छलमृच्छन्हि जनो जयश्रिया॥46॥
प्रयुज्य सपदिच्छलं मनुमिव प्रकाशेतरं
पुरोविवृतपौरुषातिशयपिञ्छकोल्लासनः।
जनस्य भुवि पश्यतो दिवमरातिमारोपय-
न्कमप्यसमकौतुकं प्रकटयेन्द्रजालक्रमम्॥47॥
43. हितमिति विनिगद्य कान्ताजने संहतव्याहृतौ
क्षणमि वपरिचिन्त्य कश्चिद्दृशाभ्युपायं पुरः।
श्लथमथ गलपाशमन्तर्विनिश्चित्य जाग्रद्भ्रुतिः
पुनरपि मुखमश्रुसत्पार्थिवोऽन्तःपुराश्रुस्तये॥48॥
44. वविधास्ततो विदधति स्वफल्कजे सह सीरिणा च हरिणा च सङ्गथाः।
उपजग्मिवानिति जगाद सादरं पुरुषो नराधिपतिवाचिकावहः॥12॥

Kṛṣṇa converse, a messenger arrives and respectfully addresses them—his courteous manner disguising the underlying threat beneath Kamsa’s outreach. Verse 11.13⁴⁵ presents the envoy’s flattery. The brothers are praised and the king’s favor for the valiant extolled, using smooth words to mask the harsh intent behind the message. In verse 11.14⁴⁶, the messenger explains that the king’s words of favour can be heard only by a fortunate few and are unavailable to lesser mortals. Together, these verses render the *dūta varṇana* as a study in deceptive diplomacy, where courtesy veils hostility and every word carries layered meaning—heightening the suspense before the inevitable clash.

11. प्रयाणः (Travel)

The *prayāṇavarṇana* in *Mathurābhyudaya* intricately fuses Kṛṣṇa’s physical progression from pastoral Gokula to the urban Mathurā with a simultaneous inward journey marked by memory and affective reflection. In verse 1.2⁴⁷, the swift advance of Akrūra’s chariot toward Mathurā contrasts with Kṛṣṇa’s lingering mental presence in Gokula, thereby staging a poignant dialectic between external movement and internal nostalgia. This tension foregrounds the protagonist’s complex psychological state, wherein the demands of destiny wrestle with the attachment to a cherished past. Further deepening this motif, verse 1.14⁴⁸ evokes a tender tableau: Kṛṣṇa’s yearning to behold the Yamunā as seen from the kadamba tree, a silent witness to his youthful frolics, anchors the journey within a landscape

45. महते प्रियाय पशुपालशेखरौ युवयोरुपस्थितिरियं महीभृतः।
त्रिजगन्नुतस्य ननु तस्य भूयसी प्रथते पराक्रमिषु पक्षपातिता॥13॥
46. विनिवेदयामि कृतिनां पुरोगमौ यदमात्यसन्निधिविशेषसाक्षिकम्।
अतिवेलदुर्लभमभाग्यशालिभिर्वचनं प्रभोस्तदवधार्यतामिदम्॥14॥
47. अक्रूरस्य रथेनाशु व्रजन्स मथुरापुरीम्।
मनोरथेन तु स्वीयां पल्लिमेव पुनर्ययौ॥2॥
48. स ऐच्छत्तरुणाभीरीचीरस्तेयैकसाक्षिणः।
नीपस्य विटपाद्द्रष्टुमधो रविसुतारयम्॥14॥

of intimate recollection and lost innocence. By verse 1.16⁴⁹, Kṛṣṇa's compassion extends outward, embracing the natural world as he wishes for the safe return of fledgling birds to their nests, thus signifying an ethical expansion from self-centered nostalgia to universal care. Through this varṇana, the poet masterfully intertwines the corporeal and the psychological, rendering the prayāna not merely as a spatial relocation but as a multifaceted passage through memory, emotion, and emerging responsibility. The varṇana thus enriches the epic's portrayal of Kṛṣṇa's transition—both temporal and existential—positioning the journey as a liminal threshold between past attachment and future destiny.

12. आजि: (Battle)

The ājivarṇana in *Mathurābhyudaya* vividly encapsulates Kṛṣṇa's martial prowess and divine sovereignty, articulating his heroism through a series of symbolically charged encounters rather than a singular climactic confrontation. In verse 9.31⁵⁰, the arresting image of an elephant seizing Kṛṣṇa's lotus-like foot is juxtaposed with the luminous crowns of reverent gods, thereby situating the episode within a cosmic frame and underscoring its mythic magnitude. Verse 9.32⁵¹ foregrounds the indispensable synergy of fraternal aid, as Balarāma's commanding shout distracts the beast, enabling Kṛṣṇa's deft withdrawal. This dynamic interplay culminates in verse 9.33⁵², where Kṛṣṇa seizes the fallen goad and ascends the elephant as one might mount a tempestuous cloud wielding lightning—an

49. पुरो नीडद्रुमादभ्रं पतन्त्यै पक्षिपडक्तये।
आशंसत सनिर्विघ्नां प्रत्यागतिमहःक्षये॥16॥
50. मदमरशिरःस्फाटिकाश्मच्छटाप्रसृतपटुमहस्तोयशस्तोदयम्।
अथ मदकरटी माधवस्याग्रहीच्चरणसरसिजं मङ्गु हस्तेन सः॥31॥
51. करिकुलहतकश्चण्डमाक्रोशता सपदि मुसलिनाकारि विक्षिप्तदृक्।
उचितमवसरं प्राप्य तद्भ्रस्ततो हरिरपि सहसामुचत्स्वं वपुः॥32॥
52. भुवि निजपुरतो द्राग्गृहीत्वा च्युतामसुविगमजडाद्यन्तृहस्तात्सृणिम्।
उपरि तत इभस्याञ्जनक्षमाभृतो घन इव सतडिच्छौरिरारूढवान्॥33॥

evocative metaphor for his sovereign mastery and elemental dominance. Together, these verses compose a richly textured tableau wherein Kṛṣṇa's martial engagement emerges as a seamless fusion of terrestrial strength and transcendent grace, thereby reaffirming his heroic stature and divine authority within the mahākāvya's grand narrative architecture.

Conclusion

The analysis of the *aṣṭādaśavarṇana* in Shankar Rajaraman's *Mathurābhyudaya* illuminates the poet's masterful adaptation of a classical Sanskrit poetic framework to craft a contemporary mahākāvya that resonates with both tradition and innovation. By employing selected *varṇana* tropes—*nagara*, *aṛṇava*, *śaila*, *ṛtu*, *candra*, *arka*, *madhupāna*, *vipralambha*, *mantra*, *dūta*, *prayāṇa*, and *āji*—the poet weaves a rich tapestry of natural imagery, emotional depth, and dramatic tension to narrate Kṛṣṇa's transformative journey from pastoral cowherd to divine protector in the Kamsavadha narrative. The sidelining of *udyāna* (garden), *salila-krīdā* (water-sport), *madanotsava* (madana-festival), *vivāha* (married separation), and *kumārodāya* (birth of princes) reflects the poet's adherence to *aucitya* (propriety), prioritizing thematic relevance over exhaustive description to avoid redundancy and maintain narrative focus. As one among the few studies to systematically analyze a mahākāvya through the *aṣṭādaśavarṇana* framework, this paper not only highlights the text's significance within the Sanskrit epic tradition but also underscores the vitality of contemporary Sanskrit composition. By bridging classical poetics with modern creativity, it invites further exploration of unpublished and non-canonical works, expanding the scholarly horizon of Sanskrit literary studies and affirming the enduring adaptability of its poetic forms.

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