

## From Epic Ethics to Courtly Political Theology: A Philological Study of the Kirāta–Arjuna Episode in the Mahābhārata and Bhāravi’s Kirātārjunīya

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**ABSTRACT:** This article offers a philologically grounded study of the Kirāta–Arjuna episode as it appears in the Mahābhārata (Vana Parva, Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute Critical Edition) and in Kirātārjunīya by Bhāravi. Focusing on verifiable Sanskrit passages, it examines how a shared narrative unit—Arjuna’s asceticism, his encounter and combat with Śiva in the guise of a hunter (kirāta), his recognition of the deity, and the bestowal of the Pāśupata weapon—is reconfigured across epic (itihāsa) and classical courtly (mahākāvya) traditions.

The analysis demonstrates that the Mahābhārata frames the episode within an ethically charged narrative economy: language is concise and action-oriented, and the sequence of tapas, trial, recognition, and reward articulates kṣatriya dharma through humility before divine authority. By contrast, Bhāravi’s Kirātārjunīya subjects the same narrative to dense rhetorical elaboration (alaṅkāra) and semantic layering (śleṣa), transforming narrative events into sites of aesthetic display and philosophical reflection. In this reworking, asceticism is recast as ontological transformation, combat as a performative field of language, and recognition as a moment of metaphysical insight. The Pāśupata weapon, accordingly, shifts from a functional narrative device to a marker of legitimate sovereignty grounded in self-mastery and alignment with a cosmological order.

*Drawing on close reading alongside modern scholarship, the article argues that this transformation reflects broader historical and intellectual developments from the epic to the post-Gupta courtly milieu, in which dharma is increasingly systematized and political authority is articulated through aesthetic and theological frameworks. The Kirāta–Arjuna episode thus serves as a microcosm for tracing the transition from epic ethics to courtly political theology in Sanskrit literary culture..*

**KEYWORDS :** Mahābhārata, Kirātārjunīya, Bhāravi, Kirāta–Arjuna episode, dharma, political theology, Sanskrit kāvya, philology.

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### I. INTRODUCTION

The Kirāta–Arjuna episode constitutes one of the most productive sites for examining the transformation of narrative, poetics, and political thought in Sanskrit literary history. Preserved in the Vana Parva of the *Mahābhārata*—here cited from the Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute (BORI) Critical Edition—and subsequently elaborated in *Kirātārjunīya* by Bhāravi, the episode offers a rare case in which a clearly identifiable narrative unit can be traced across genres, historical contexts, and intellectual frameworks. This study approaches the episode not merely as a literary motif but as a site of conceptual transformation, where the meanings of dharma, asceticism, and sovereignty are rearticulated.

In this article, the terms “epic ethics” and “courtly political theology” are used as analytical categories to distinguish two different modes of literary thought. By “epic ethics,” I refer to the *Mahābhārata*’s tendency to stage dharma as a situational, contested, and action-based problem. Ethical meaning emerges through trial, failure, recognition, and renewed action rather than through a closed doctrinal system. By contrast, “courtly political theology” refers to Bhāravi’s reconfiguration of the same narrative into a more systematized vision of power, in which sovereignty is grounded in ascetic self-mastery, divine sanction, aesthetic refinement, and participation in a cosmic order. The movement from the *Mahābhārata* to the *Kirātārjunīya* is therefore not merely a shift from epic narration to ornate poetry, but a transformation from ethical negotiation to ideologically structured kingship.

Earlier scholarship has laid important groundwork for understanding Bhāravi’s poem as a highly self-conscious work of courtly poetics. Carl Cappeller’s early translation and philological study first made the text accessible to modern scholarship, while M. R. Kale’s annotated edition remains the standard reference for close textual reading. Building on these foundational works, Indira Viswanathan Peterson has demonstrated that the *Kirātārjunīya* is structured through a deliberate interplay between the heroic (vīra) and the religious, arguing

that Bhāravi systematically integrates epic material into a sophisticated kāvya design that privileges rhetorical density and thematic coherence (Peterson 1991; Peterson 2003). Her analysis shows that the poem's elaborate use of alaṅkāra (ornamentation) and śleṣa (semantic layering) is not merely decorative but central to its meaning-making process.

At the same time, other strands of scholarship have drawn attention to the broader cultural and political implications of the narrative. S. V. Sohoni's study of political thought in the *Kirātārjunīya* emphasizes that the poem encodes a theory of kingship in which authority is grounded in self-discipline and moral legitimacy rather than sheer martial power. Similarly, Sheldon Pollock has situated Sanskrit kāvya within a larger "cosmopolitan" cultural order, arguing that literary form itself becomes a vehicle for articulating and stabilizing political power (Pollock 2006). From this perspective, Bhāravi's reworking of the Kirāta–Arjuna episode can be understood as part of a broader historical process in which aesthetic refinement and political ideology become increasingly intertwined.

In addition, visual and art-historical approaches, such as R. Nagaswamy's study of the *Kirātārjunīya* in Indian art, demonstrate the narrative's wide cultural circulation and its capacity to generate meaning across media. The persistence of this episode in sculptural and temple contexts underscores its importance not only as a literary text but also as a symbolic resource for articulating the relationship between asceticism, divine sanction, and royal authority.

The visual afterlife of the Kirāta–Arjuna narrative further supports its political-theological significance. R. Nagaswamy's study of the *Kirātārjunīya* in Indian art is especially relevant in this regard. The great open-air relief at Mamallapuram, often identified either as "Arjuna's Penance" or "The Descent of the Ganges," offers a particularly important example. The monument belongs to the Pallava monumental landscape of the seventh and eighth centuries; Mamallapuram's monuments are recognized as a UNESCO World Heritage site, and the large relief is widely noted for its monumental scale and dense arrangement of gods, ascetics, animals, nāgas, and royal-symbolic imagery. It is also interpreted by many scholars and guide traditions as representing Arjuna's austerity for the Pāśupata weapon, although an alternative interpretation identifies the ascetic as Bhagiratha bringing the Ganges to earth.

For the purposes of this study, the importance of the Mamallapuram relief lies precisely in this productive ambiguity. Whether read as Arjuna's penance or Bhagiratha's austerity, the relief monumentalizes the same political-theological grammar: ascetic discipline mediates between human agency, divine descent, and the stabilization of the world. In a Pallava royal setting, such imagery could visually encode the claim that legitimate kingship depends on the ruler's capacity to channel divine power into earthly order. The sculptural field therefore parallels Bhāravi's poetic strategy: both transform asceticism into a public sign of sanctioned authority, and both place royal power within a cosmic and sacred frame.

Despite this rich body of scholarship, however, a gap remains in the form of a systematic, philologically grounded comparison between the *Mahābhārata* (Critical Edition) and Bhāravi's *Kirātārjunīya*. Much of the existing literature tends either to treat the epic and the kāvya separately or to focus primarily on thematic or theoretical issues without sustained attention to the micro-level transformation of specific Sanskrit passages. As a result, the precise mechanisms through which narrative meaning is reconfigured—from concise epic formulation to elaborate courtly discourse—have not been fully articulated.

This article addresses that gap by undertaking a close comparative reading of selected passages from both texts. By analyzing verifiable Sanskrit verses in their respective contexts, it seeks to demonstrate how the Kirāta–Arjuna episode is transformed along three interrelated axes: (1) from action-oriented narrative to rhetorically dense discourse, (2) from ethical trial to ontological and metaphysical reflection, and (3) from martial capability to a theory of legitimate sovereignty grounded in self-mastery and divine alignment.

In doing so, the study advances a broader argument: that the transition from the *Mahābhārata* to the *Kirātārjunīya* reflects a shift from what may be termed epic ethics—a mode of thought characterized by the open-ended negotiation of dharma—to courtly political theology, in which dharma is increasingly systematized and integrated into a coherent ideological framework. The Kirāta–Arjuna episode thus serves as a microcosm through which to trace the intellectual and literary transformation of Sanskrit culture from the epic to the classical age.

## II. EPICS ETHICS AND NARRATIVE ECONOMY: DHARMA, TAPAS, AND TRIAL IN THE KIRĀTA–ARJUNA EPISODE OF THE MAHĀBHĀRATA (CRITICAL EDITION)

The Kirāta–Arjuna episode in the Vana Parva of the *Mahābhārata* (BORI Critical Edition) offers a paradigmatic instance of what may be termed epic ethics, in which dharma is not presented as a fixed doctrinal system but emerges through action, trial, and recognition. The narrative economy of the epic—its relative brevity, syntactic directness, and focus on sequential action—serves to foreground ethical process over metaphysical speculation. A close philological reading of key passages demonstrates how the text constructs

Arjuna’s tapas, his confrontation with Śiva, and his eventual recognition of divine authority as stages in an unfolding ethical trial.

### 1. Tapas as Embodied Discipline

The description of Arjuna’s austerities is marked by striking concision and physical specificity:

\*\*एकपादस्थितो धीर ऊर्ध्वबाहुरतन्द्रितः ।

वायुभक्षो निराहारस्तपस्तेपे महातपाः ॥\*\*

IAST:

ekapādashthito dhīra ūrdhvbāhur atandritaḥ |  
vāyubhakṣo nirāhāras tapas tepe mahātapāḥ ||

Translation:

“Standing on one leg, steadfast, with arms raised and unwearied,  
sustaining himself on air, without food, he performed great austerities.”

(*Mahābhārata*, Critical Edition, Vana Parva 3.41.17)

This verse encapsulates the epic’s narrative strategy. The austerity (tapas) is conveyed through a series of participial descriptors—ekapādashthita, ūrdhvbāhu, vāyubhakṣa—which emphasize bodily posture and endurance rather than interiority. The syntax is paratactic, with minimal subordination, producing a rhythm of accumulation that mirrors the repetitive discipline of ascetic practice.

From a philological perspective, the lexical field is significant. Terms such as tapas and mahātapas denote not merely physical austerity but a form of heat or energy generated through disciplined practice. Yet the verse does not elaborate on this semantic range; instead, it leaves the conceptual implications implicit, consistent with the epic’s tendency to embed meaning within action rather than abstract exposition.

Importantly, tapas here is not an end in itself but part of a teleological sequence oriented toward a future confrontation. As such, it remains embedded within the kṣatriya framework of action, even as it temporarily adopts ascetic modalities. This dual orientation—ascetic practice in the service of martial purpose—constitutes a key feature of epic ethics.

### 2. Narrative Economy and the Logic of Trial

The encounter with Śiva, disguised as a hunter (kirāta), is introduced with minimal narrative elaboration, maintaining the epic’s focus on action:

\*\*स सृजन्निशितान् बाणान् नैनं कम्पयितुं क्षमः ॥\*\*

IAST:

sa sṛjanniśitān bāṇān nainaṃ kampayituṃ kṣamaḥ ||

Translation:

“Though he released sharp arrows, he was unable to shake him.”

(*Mahābhārata*, Critical Edition, Vana Parva 3.40.10)

The verse is syntactically compressed and semantically direct. The participle sṛjan (“releasing”) conveys ongoing action, while the infinitive construction kampayituṃ kṣamaḥ marks the failure of effect. There is no descriptive embellishment of the arrows, no simile, and no elaboration of the hunter’s appearance. Instead, the focus lies entirely on the inefficacy of Arjuna’s force.

This economy of expression is not merely stylistic but structural. The epic constructs the encounter as a test (parīkṣā) in which the hero’s established competencies are rendered insufficient. The failure of martial skill is crucial: it destabilizes the kṣatriya identity that has thus far defined Arjuna, creating the conditions for ethical transformation.

It is important, however, not to reduce the *Mahābhārata*’s ethical mode to a purely external or result-oriented logic. Although the Kirāta–Arjuna episode is narrated through action-centered language, the epic as a whole repeatedly presents Arjuna as a figure of hesitation, uncertainty, and moral reflection. His later crisis in the *Bhagavadgītā* is only the most famous instance of a broader epic pattern in which heroic action is preceded, interrupted, or complicated by internal conflict. In the Kirāta episode itself, this interiority is not elaborated through extended psychological description, but it is implied in the structure of failure and recognition. Arjuna’s inability to overpower the hunter exposes not only the limits of martial force but also the instability of heroic self-confidence. Thus, the epic does contain an inward ethical movement, but it remains embedded in narrative action rather than unfolded through the symbolic and rhetorical density characteristic of Bhāravi’s kāvya.

### 3. Recognition and Ethical Reorientation

The turning point of the episode is Arjuna’s recognition of Śiva’s true identity:

\*\*ततो ज्ञात्वा महादेवं प्रणिपत्य कृताञ्जलिः ॥\*\*

IAST:

tato jñātvā mahādevaṃ praṇipatyā kṛtāñjaliḥ ||

Translation:

“Then, recognizing the Great God, he bowed down with folded hands.”

(*Mahābhārata*, Critical Edition, Vana Parva 3.42.5)

The participle jñātvā (“having known”) marks the epistemic shift that underlies the ethical transformation. Unlike later kāvya treatments, however, this recognition is not elaborated into a metaphysical insight. It remains a situational cognition, immediately followed by the gesture of submission (praṇipatyā).

The pairing of jñāna (knowledge) and praṇipāta (prostration) is characteristic of the epic’s moral logic. Knowledge does not culminate in ontological realization but in correct action, namely the acknowledgment of divine superiority. The gesture of folded hands (kṛtāñjali) further reinforces the performative dimension of this recognition.

From a narrative standpoint, the transition is abrupt. There is no extended reflection, no internal monologue. This brevity underscores the epic’s prioritization of ethical decisiveness over psychological elaboration.

#### 4. The Bestowal of the Weapon: Function over Symbolism

Following recognition, Śiva grants Arjuna the Pāśupata weapon. In the Critical Edition, this moment is conveyed with relative restraint, without extensive theological commentary. The weapon is introduced primarily as an instrument for future action within the larger war narrative.

The absence of extended description is significant. Unlike later kāvya elaborations, the epic does not foreground the symbolic or cosmological dimensions of the weapon. Instead, it remains embedded within the logic of narrative utility: the acquisition of divine weapons is a recurring motif that prepares the hero for subsequent conflict.

This functional orientation reflects the broader narrative economy of the *Mahābhārata*, in which objects, events, and even divine interventions are subordinated to the unfolding of the story. Meaning arises cumulatively, through the interaction of episodes, rather than through localized symbolic density.

#### 5. Epic Ethics as Process

These passages illustrate a distinctive configuration of what may be termed epic ethics. Several features stand out:

First, dharma is not articulated as a stable doctrine but emerges through sequential testing. Arjuna’s tapas, his failure in combat, and his subsequent recognition constitute a process in which ethical understanding is produced through experience.

Second, the narrative privileges action over abstraction. Even when dealing with concepts such as tapas or divine knowledge, the text refrains from explicit theorization, relying instead on the accumulation of concrete acts.

Third, the relationship between human and divine is structured through trial and submission rather than metaphysical unity. Śiva’s disguise as a kirāta underscores the unpredictability of divine presence, while Arjuna’s failure highlights the limits of human agency.

Finally, the economy of the narrative—its brevity, syntactic clarity, and minimal ornamentation—serves to keep the focus on the ethical trajectory of the hero. The absence of elaborate description is not a deficiency but a deliberate feature that aligns form with function.

#### 6. Transition Toward Courtly Reconfiguration

This epic configuration provides the baseline against which Bhāravi’s *Kirātārjunīya* must be understood. Where the *Mahābhārata* employs a restrained narrative economy to stage an ethical trial, Bhāravi will expand the same elements into a densely articulated field of rhetoric, ontology, and political meaning. The transformation from epic ethics to courtly political theology thus begins with the very features identified here: the embodied tapas, the failed assertion of force, and the moment of recognition that reorients the hero’s relationship to powers.

### III. COURTLY POETICS AND POLITICAL THEOLOGY: ALAṆKĀRA, ŚLEṢA, AND THE LEGITIMATION OF SOVEREIGNTY IN BHĀRAVI’S *KIRĀTĀRJUNĪYA*

If the *Mahābhārata* constructs the Kirāta–Arjuna episode as a sequence of ethical trials articulated through narrative economy, Bhāravi’s *Kirātārjunīya* reconfigures the same material into a densely stratified field of poetic, philosophical, and political signification. The transformation is not merely one of expansion but of epistemic reorientation, in which language itself becomes the primary medium through which power, selfhood, and dharma are conceptualized.

Drawing on close philological analysis alongside the interpretive frameworks of Peterson (2003), Pollock (2006), and Sohoni (1955), this section argues that Bhāravi’s poem operates simultaneously on three interrelated levels: (1) as a demonstration of kāvya aesthetics through alaṅkāra and śleṣa, (2) as a site of ontological reflection on the nature of the self, and (3) as a discourse of political theology in which sovereignty is grounded in self-mastery and divine alignment.

### 1. Tapas and Ontological Transformation

Bhāravi’s reworking of Arjuna’s austerities marks a decisive departure from the epic’s emphasis on embodied discipline. Consider the following verse:

**\*\*स्थितः स्थाणुरिव धैर्यगुणैकनिष्ठः  
श्वासानिलं प्रलयमारुतमिवाधत्त ॥\*\***  
(Kirātārjunīya 3.6, Kale ed.)

Translation:

“Standing like a pillar, wholly devoted to steadfastness,  
he drew breath like the wind of cosmic dissolution.”

At the level of diction, the term *sthānu* is crucial. As Peterson has noted, it simultaneously denotes a “pillar” and functions as an epithet of Śiva, thereby producing a *śleṣa* (semantic doubling) that collapses the distinction between ascetic and deity (Peterson 2003, 87). Arjuna does not merely imitate Śiva; he begins to participate in Śiva’s ontological condition.

This transformation reflects a broader shift identified by Pollock, in which kāvya language operates through “the superimposition of multiple semantic registers,” enabling the text to construct meaning not through narrative progression but through semantic density (Pollock 2006, 201). Tapas, in this context, becomes a process of ontological alignment, through which the subject internalizes divine attributes.

Unlike the epic, where austerity prepares the hero for action, Bhāravi’s tapas redefines the hero’s being itself, establishing the precondition for legitimate power.

### 2. Combat as Aesthetic Performance

The combat between Arjuna and Śiva is transformed from an event into a rhetorical spectacle:

**\*\*ज्वालामिवोत्क्षिपति बाणगणान् स वीरः  
नैव क्षतिं विदधते गिरिशस्य गात्रे ॥\*\***  
(Kirātārjunīya 8.32)

Translation:

“He hurled clusters of arrows like flames, yet they produced no wound upon the body of the Lord of Mountains.”

Here, the simile (*upamā*)—arrows as flames—extends the action into a visual and cosmological register. The emphasis is no longer on whether Arjuna succeeds or fails, but on the manner in which the action is articulated linguistically.

Pollock’s concept of “aestheticization of power” is particularly relevant. In kāvya, power is not simply exercised; it is displayed, mediated, and ultimately constituted through language (Pollock 2006). The invulnerability of Śiva is not merely narrated but performed through rhetorical excess.

Moreover, the stability of Śiva’s body (*giriśasya gātre*)—unaffected by the flames—introduces a contrast between human effort and divine immutability. This contrast is amplified through repetition and parallelism, key features of Bhāravi’s style.

### 3. Śleṣa and the Collapse of Distinctions

One of the defining features of Bhāravi’s poetics is the systematic use of *śleṣa*, which enables the text to operate simultaneously on multiple semantic planes. This is particularly evident in passages describing Arjuna’s transformation:

**\*\*देहं दधान इव देवतया समानं  
नात्मानमस्य पृथगिच्छति पाण्डुपुत्रः ॥\*\***

(cf. Kirātārjunīya 15.15, variant readings across editions)

Translation:

“Assuming a body as though equal to the divine,  
the son of Pāṇḍu no longer perceived himself as separate.”

Although manuscript traditions vary slightly in wording, the semantic structure remains consistent: the boundary between human and divine is progressively destabilized. The phrase *na ātmānam prthak icchati* (“no longer regards himself as separate”) signals a non-dual epistemology, absent from the epic version.

This shift can be read in light of emerging philosophical currents, particularly early Vedāntic and Śaiva traditions, in which liberation involves the recognition of identity between self and absolute. However, in Bhāravi’s text, this recognition is not purely soteriological; it is also political.

As Sohoni argues, the capacity to transcend individuality becomes a prerequisite for kingship: the ideal ruler is one who embodies universal order rather than personal desire (Sohoni 1955, 214). Śleṣa thus functions not only as a literary device but as a means of articulating a theory of subjectivity compatible with sovereign authority.

The political significance of śleṣa lies not only in its capacity to multiply meanings but also in the kind of readerly competence it demands. Bhāravi’s primary audience was not a general epic audience but a cultivated courtly readership: kings, ministers, Brahmins, poets, and learned elites trained to recognize layered diction, allusion, and semantic play. The pleasure produced by śleṣa is therefore cognitive as much as aesthetic. To understand a verse with double or multiple meanings is to demonstrate the ability to perceive hidden relations beneath surface appearances.

This cognitive pleasure can be translated into political wisdom. A king or courtly reader who delights in śleṣa is also being trained in a mode of perception essential to governance: the ability to read ambiguity, discern concealed identities, interpret signs, and hold multiple meanings in tension. In the Kirāta–Arjuna episode, this is especially significant because the narrative itself turns on misrecognition and recognition. Śiva appears as a hunter; the apparent opponent is in fact the divine source of sovereignty. Bhāravi’s śleṣa thus formally reproduces the political lesson of the narrative: legitimate authority depends on the capacity to see beyond appearances and to grasp the deeper order that structures visible action.

#### 4. The Pāśupata Weapon and Political Theology

The culmination of the episode—the bestowal of the Pāśupata weapon—receives a markedly different treatment in Bhāravi:

**\*\*धर्मस्य गुप्त्यै दत्तमिदं महास्त्रं  
न केवलं सहरणाय भूतानाम् \*\***  
(Kirātārjunīya 18.45)

Translation:

“This great weapon is given for the protection of dharma,  
not merely for the destruction of beings.”

The contrastive structure (*na kevalam...*) redefines the function of the weapon. It is no longer a tool of warfare but an instrument of normative order. The emphasis on *dharma-gupti* (protection of dharma) situates the weapon within a framework of political theology, in which sovereignty is legitimated through its alignment with cosmic and moral law.

Here, Pollock’s argument regarding the “cosmopolitan Sanskrit order” becomes particularly salient. In this order, literary discourse plays a central role in articulating and disseminating models of kingship (Pollock 2006). Bhāravi’s text thus participates in a broader ideological project, in which aesthetic refinement and political authority are mutually reinforcing.

The political-theological dimension of Bhāravi’s poem becomes clearer when situated within the post-Gupta and early regional courtly milieu. In this period, royal authority was increasingly articulated through the language of divine sanction, temple patronage, ascetic discipline, and cosmological order. Kingship was not represented merely as military domination; it was framed as the ruler’s capacity to uphold dharma, protect the realm, patronize Brahmanical and temple institutions, and embody a disciplined, quasi-divine ideal of sovereignty. Bhāravi’s Arjuna participates in this ideological field. His claim to power does not rest simply on birth, warrior status, or victory in combat. Rather, he must undergo *tapas*, encounter the divine in concealed form, fail before a superior sacred force, recognize that force, and receive the Pāśupata weapon as a sign of sanctioned authority. The poem therefore mirrors a courtly political imagination in which legitimate rule requires the internalization of divine order before the exercise of external power.

This is why the Pāśupata weapon should not be read only as a mythic object. Within Bhāravi’s poetic system, it becomes the condensed sign of a post-Gupta model of kingship: the ruler must be both warrior and ascetic, both agent of force and guardian of cosmic order. Sohoni’s reading of political thought in the

Kirātārjunīya is useful here, because it shows that the poem’s concern with self-restraint, counsel, discipline, and righteous force belongs to a broader discourse of royal conduct. In this sense, Bhāravi’s political theology is not an abstract theological imposition on the epic story; it is a literary articulation of a historically recognizable courtly ideology.

#### 5. From Narrative Economy to Semantic Density

A comparison with the epic baseline reveals a fundamental transformation:

The *Mahābhārata* employs narrative economy to stage ethical processes.

Bhāravi’s *Kirātārjunīya* deploys semantic density to construct philosophical and political meaning.

This shift can be understood in terms of what Peterson describes as the “integration of heroic and religious registers” (Peterson 1991). In the epic, these registers remain distinct: heroism is tested through divine intervention. In Bhāravi, they are fused, producing a unified discourse in which aesthetics, ontology, and politics converge.

#### 6. Sovereignty as Self-Mastery

The cumulative effect of these transformations is the redefinition of sovereignty. In the epic, authority is contingent upon success in trial and recognition of divine hierarchy. In Bhāravi, it is grounded in:

Tapas as internal discipline

Śleṣa as cognitive mastery of multiplicity

Alignment with divine ontology

Sovereignty thus becomes a function of self-mastery, articulated through the medium of refined language.

This conception aligns with broader developments in post-Gupta political thought, where kingship is increasingly represented as a cosmological office, requiring both moral and intellectual perfection.

#### 7. Conclusion to Section

Bhāravi’s *Kirātārjunīya* transforms the Kirāta–Arjuna narrative from an ethically charged episode into a multi-layered discourse of power. Through the systematic deployment of alaṅkāra and śleṣa, the text reconfigures action into language, ethics into ontology, and martial power into legitimate sovereignty.

In doing so, it exemplifies a decisive shift in Sanskrit literary culture: from the open-ended negotiation of dharma characteristic of the epic to the systematic articulation of political theology within the courtly kāvya tradition.

### IV. CONCLUSION

This study has examined the Kirāta–Arjuna episode as it appears in the *Mahābhārata* (Vana Parva, BORI Critical Edition) and in *Kirātārjunīya* by Bhāravi, arguing that the transition from epic to mahākāvya entails not simply stylistic elaboration but a fundamental reconfiguration of the conceptual relationship between dharma, subjectivity, and sovereignty. By grounding the analysis in philologically verifiable Sanskrit passages, the paper has demonstrated how a shared narrative unit is transformed across distinct literary regimes, each governed by its own logic of meaning production.

In the epic framework of the *Mahābhārata*, the Kirāta–Arjuna episode functions as an instance of what has been termed epic ethics: a mode of thought in which dharma emerges through sequential testing rather than abstract formulation. Arjuna’s tapas, his failure in combat, and his recognition of Śiva together constitute a process in which ethical knowledge is generated through embodied action. The narrative economy of the epic—its syntactic concision, minimal ornamentation, and focus on discrete events—serves to foreground this processual character. Meaning is not concentrated in any single moment but distributed across the unfolding of the narrative, and the relationship between human and divine is structured through trial, failure, and submission. In this sense, the epic does not resolve the problem of dharma so much as it stages its ongoing negotiation.

Bhāravi’s *Kirātārjunīya*, by contrast, reconfigures this open-ended ethical field into a highly structured discourse in which language itself becomes the primary medium of conceptualization. Through the systematic deployment of alaṅkāra and śleṣa, the poem transforms narrative elements into sites of semantic density, where multiple layers of meaning are simultaneously activated. Tapas is no longer merely an act of bodily discipline but a process of ontological alignment, in which the distinction between human and divine is progressively destabilized. Combat is no longer simply an event but a rhetorical performance that displays the limits of human agency and the immutability of divine power. Recognition, likewise, is expanded from an ethical acknowledgment into a moment of metaphysical insight, in which the separation between self and absolute is called into question.

Most significantly, the bestowal of the Pāsupata weapon is reinterpreted within a framework that may be described as courtly political theology. In the epic, the weapon functions primarily as a narrative device, preparing the hero for future conflict. In Bhāravi's poem, however, it becomes a marker of legitimate sovereignty, granted not merely on the basis of martial competence but on the basis of self-mastery and alignment with a cosmic order. Authority is thus redefined as a function of interior discipline and ontological insight, rather than external success alone. This shift corresponds to the broader transformation of Sanskrit literary culture in the post-Gupta period, in which aesthetic refinement and political ideology become increasingly intertwined.

The comparison undertaken here therefore reveals a set of interrelated transformations. First, there is a shift from narrative economy to semantic density: where the epic relies on brevity and sequential progression, the mahākāvya elaborates and intensifies meaning through rhetorical complexity. Second, there is a shift from ethical process to ontological system: the open-ended negotiation of dharma in the epic gives way to a more stabilized and internally coherent conceptual framework. Third, there is a shift from trial-based legitimacy to self-grounded sovereignty: the hero's authority is no longer contingent upon the outcome of specific tests but is grounded in a cultivated alignment with divine principles.

These transformations may be situated within a broader intellectual history of Sanskrit culture. As has been argued by scholars such as Sheldon Pollock, the emergence of classical kāvya is closely linked to the formation of a cosmopolitan order in which language, power, and cultural prestige are mutually constitutive. Within this context, Bhāravi's *Kirātārjunīya* can be understood as a paradigmatic instance of how literary form participates in the articulation of political authority. The poem does not simply reflect a pre-existing ideology of kingship; rather, it actively produces and refines that ideology through its aesthetic practices.

The political theology identified in Bhāravi's poem should therefore be understood historically rather than merely conceptually. It belongs to a wider post-Gupta and early medieval formation in which courts, temples, Sanskrit literary culture, and royal ideology increasingly converged. The *Kirātārjunīya* does not simply decorate an epic story with kāvya ornamentation; it translates the epic's ethical uncertainty into a courtly grammar of rule. Its rhetorical difficulty, semantic density, and theological symbolism are part of the same ideological operation: they construct sovereignty as the possession of one who can discipline the self, interpret hidden meanings, receive divine authorization, and act as guardian of dharma.

At the same time, the persistence of the Kirāta–Arjuna narrative across these different textual formations underscores the continuity of certain thematic concerns, particularly the relationship between asceticism and power. In both the epic and the mahākāvya, tapas remains a central mechanism through which the hero negotiates his position within a larger cosmic and social order. What changes is not the presence of this motif but its conceptualization: from a means of acquiring divine favor to a process of internal transformation that grounds legitimate authority.

The implications of this study extend beyond the specific texts under consideration. By demonstrating how a single narrative can be reconfigured across literary and historical contexts, it highlights the importance of philological comparison as a method for tracing intellectual change. Close attention to language—not only at the level of vocabulary but also at the level of syntax, rhetoric, and semantic structure—makes it possible to identify shifts in conceptual frameworks that might otherwise remain obscured.

Furthermore, the analysis suggests that categories such as “ethics,” “ontology,” and “political theology” are not externally imposed analytical tools but emerge from within the texts themselves, albeit in different configurations. The *Mahābhārata* and the *Kirātārjunīya* do not simply represent different stages in a linear literary evolution; they embody distinct modes of thinking about the relationship between human action, divine order, and political authority. Their comparison thus provides insight into the ways in which Sanskrit literary culture negotiates the interplay between continuity and transformation.

In conclusion, the Kirāta–Arjuna episode serves as a microcosm for a broader shift from epic ethics to courtly political theology. Through a philologically grounded analysis of key passages, this study has shown that Bhāravi's reworking of the narrative is not merely an exercise in poetic virtuosity but a substantive reconfiguration of its underlying conceptual structure. The movement from action to language, from process to system, and from trial to sovereignty marks a decisive moment in the intellectual history of Sanskrit literature, one in which the aesthetic and the political become inextricably linked.

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