

Kanakadasa's *Nalacharite*: A Contemporary Dialogue

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A literary work is shaped by the socio-cultural currents of the era in which it is created. When we interpret that same work in a different era, it is likely to take on new and different meanings. We often use terms like *contemporary* and *timeless* to describe the value of such works. But even these terms are relative and open to interpretation. A poem that once set out to advocate a particular philosophy may—when seen through the lens of a different time—reveal a new worldview altogether. The various interpretations that the *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata* have received over different historical periods serve as clear examples of this. For instance, Kuvempu's reinterpretation of the *Shambuka episode* in his work *Shudra Tapasvi* is a notable case in point.

With this context in mind, it becomes possible—and relevant—to examine the works of Kanakadasa through a contemporary lens.

In the 15th century, Kanakadasa emerged as a revolutionary poet, a devotee, a saint, and a social thinker striving to uplift the lives of ordinary people. His thinking was deeply shaped by issues of caste and the varna system. Through works like *Ramadhanya Charite*, he offered a proud and dignified response to such social divisions. Many legends surround Kanakadasa. One well-known tale involves his guru, Vyasaraaya, asking him to eat a banana in a place where no one could see him. Kanaka returned without eating it, saying there is no place where no one is present—because God is all-pervading. When asked “Who among you will go to heaven?”, he is said to have simply responded, “If I go, I'll go”—a subtle but powerful answer.

These anecdotes bear witness to the image we have formed of Kanakadasa: not only was he perceptive and intellectually sharp, but his deep humility, awareness of the self, and worldly insight are all deeply relevant for modern times. His philosophy of egolessness forms a compelling and humanistic foundation, offering important perspectives in contemporary discourse.

Kanakadasa's Background and His Unique Literary Position

To understand Kanakadasa's works better, especially in a contemporary context, it is important to recognize the uniqueness of his personal and social background.

Firstly, Kanakadasa belonged to the Kuruba community—a backward caste not part of the Vedic or Brahminical order. This gave his voice a distinctiveness that set him apart from other contemporaneous composers and poets who were rooted in Vedic traditions. This difference is evident in both his *keertanas* (devotional songs) and his literary works.

In his *Ramadhanya Charite*, for example, Kanakadasa critiques the caste system using symbolic satire, framing devotion (bhakti) as a path of equality. In *Mohana Tarangini*, he explores love and longing as metaphors for devotion. The selected work for this contemporary discussion, *Nalacharite*, presents devotion through the lens of **moral values and ethical dilemmas**, providing yet another layer to Kanakadasa's distinct philosophical perspective.

Secondly, he was not just a composer of devotional songs (keertanakara); he was a **true poet**—a thinker who engaged with poetic and philosophical traditions. Kannada literary heritage has long included poets

affiliated with different religious traditions: Jain, Vaishnava, Veerashaiva, and so on. Kanakadasa stands out here too, as his **non-Brahminical** origins bring an alternate sensibility to his works. When interpreting his poetry, we must keep in mind this unique emotional and intellectual grounding.

Thirdly, though Kanakadasa belonged to the Kuruba caste, he did **not come from an economically deprived background**. The title “Nayaka” suggests he likely held a feudal or military position, possibly as a local chieftain or warrior. This is an important distinction: in today’s framework, we cannot entirely fit Kanakadasa into the model of a socially and economically “backward” figure. However, his **non-Brahmin identity remains central** to understanding the subversive power of his writings.

Fourth, the many legends and miracle-stories about Kanakadasa raise another critical question: **How do we interpret his persona and legacy in light of these stories?** Do they illuminate his spiritual stature, or do they risk mythologizing and distancing us from the real, radical social reformer he was?

***Nalacharite* in Contemporary Dialogue – Re-reading Through Modern Values**

This attempt to interpret *Nalacharite* in light of the contemporary moment aims to examine what values it upholds and how they resonate today. A key question arises when we bring a text like *Nalacharite* into contemporary conversation: **How do we understand value systems in a modern context?**

We live in a democratic society. Over 75 years have passed since Indian independence. Life has changed across many dimensions—social, political, economic—and as a result, **our values have changed too**. So when we read works like *Ramadhanya Charite* or *Nalacharite*, should we view them only through the lens of traditional or spiritual morality? Or can we also **re-read them from different, modern perspectives?**

For example, can we rethink how concepts like **love, marital fidelity, and womanhood** are portrayed? Must a wife always be obedient to her husband? Or is mutual respect and understanding a better foundation?

Is a woman expected to follow her husband regardless of how he behaves—or can that very expectation be questioned as outdated?

These are the questions we must ask when reinterpreting *Nalacharite* through a contemporary lens.

The source material of *Nalacharite* comes from the *Mahabharata*—specifically, 28 chapters from the *Vana Parva*, where sage Rishi Ramesha narrates the story to a grief-stricken Yudhishtira (Dharma Raya), who has just lost his kingdom.

Kanakadasa’s *Nalacharite*, composed in *Bhāminī Shatpadi* metre with nine chapters (sandhis), depicts how **even the most virtuous can fall into misfortune due to fate**, but through divine grace and moral steadfastness, they can overcome it. The story focuses on the trials faced by Nala and Damayanti, emphasizing how values like **devotion, discipline, and righteousness** can eventually restore a shattered life.

That said, values such as **morality** and **faith**—though desirable in any age—are still **relative**. The meanings we attach to God, Dharma, and Karma have evolved. So when the poem emphasizes **fate (karma) or divine play (daiva leele)**, we may no longer see these as central or convincing explanations for human suffering. But what remains relevant—and even profound—are the **human relationships** that the story portrays:

- Nala and Damayanti
- Nala and Rituparna

These relational dynamics deserve close attention in modern analysis.

Now, an important literary question arises: Although the title of the poem is *Nalacharite*, **why must Nala remain the central character?** Can we not place **Damayanti at the center** of the narrative instead?

This shift in perspective would fundamentally alter the meaning we derive from the poem.

Historically, even though Kanakadasa's work is titled *Nalacharite*, the story has survived in public memory more commonly as "the tale of Nala and Damayanti." By placing both characters at the center—or especially Damayanti—we can begin a **gender-sensitive study** of the poem, relevant to feminist and egalitarian discourse today.

If we don't do this, we fall into the usual pattern: Even though both Nala and Damayanti endure similar hardships, the **man emerges as the hero**, while the woman fades into the background. This undermines modern democratic ideals of **equality and mutual agency**.

Therefore, it becomes essential to **reinterpret *Nalacharite* with Damayanti as the emotional and moral center** of the story.

Rethinking Pativrata Dharma — Feminist and Folk Reinterpretations

When we attempt a reinterpretation of *Nalacharite* with **Damayanti at the center**, we are faced with a critical question:

Is the scene where Nala abandons Damayanti in the forest justifiable?

Yes, Nala is portrayed as a noble character—morally upright and deeply in love with Damayanti. His personal grief is evident. His pain at being separated from his wife is described as immense. But despite all of this, the act of abandoning her in the forest cannot be brushed aside. It raises a deeply uncomfortable question about **the limits of ideal love and moral virtue**.

In classical poetry, figures like Sita, Damayanti, Draupadi, and Chandramati are held up as paragons of *pativrata dharma*—the sacred duty of a wife to remain loyal and devoted to her husband, regardless of circumstances.

Damayanti, born a royal, descends into hardship, follows Nala into the forest, shares in his suffering, and shows **equal resolve** through both prosperity and adversity. The poem elevates this as a noble ideal.

When Nala's fate finally improves, the poem attributes it to **Damayanti's unwavering devotion**—her *pativrata dharmahas* earned divine favor. We're also shown how she rejects Indra's proposal before her marriage, and even later during her second *swayamvara*, she continues to recognize Nala—disguised as Bahuka—out of sheer devotion and intuition. All these narrative moments are used to glorify **her fidelity and moral fortitude**.

However, **in today's world of gender equality and mutual respect**, these traditional interpretations demand **re-examination**.

Modern readers must ask:

- Should a woman endure such hardship silently in the name of loyalty?
- Is unconditional obedience the true sign of virtue?
- Or, is **mutual trust**, equality, and self-respect the real essence of a loving relationship?

Folk epics offer us striking alternatives.

For example, in the folk Mahakavya *Malemahadeshwara*, there is a character named **Sankavva**, wife of Neelayya. When Neelayya has to leave for a pilgrimage, Sankavva promises she won't see anyone until he returns. But when her husband returns and **questions her fidelity**, she becomes furious. She rejects his suspicion outright, refusing to accept such baseless doubt. When he continues to impose conditions on her, **she asserts her own autonomy**. This portrayal of Sankavva redefines *pativrata dharma* as not just loyalty to a husband, but as **dignified mutual trust**.

Here, the folk poet declares: **"Where there is no trust, there is no love."** This simple, powerful redefinition is deeply aligned with modern feminist thought and democratic values.

Contrast this with *Nalacharite*, where Damayanti doesn't confront Nala, but instead turns to the gods—Yama, Varuna, Vayu, Indra—and finally convinces the celestial swan (Baanuli) to help her. Only through divine intervention does Nala accept her again. There is **no assertion of personal dignity or challenge to patriarchal norms**. This stands in sharp contrast to the empowered voice seen in Sankavva.

Thus, while the folk tradition upholds **individual freedom and moral equality**, *Nalacharite*—at least in its classical form—tends to idealize **passive endurance and self-sacrifice**.

This brings us to a larger reflection: In our **modern society**, where we strive for **equal relationships and gender justice**, shouldn't we **critically assess and reinterpret** age-old ideals like *pativrata dharma*?

The Symbolism of Nala's Forest Exile – A Model for Democratic Leadership

A particularly compelling dimension in the contemporary reading of *Nalacharite* is the **moment in which sage Ramesha narrates Nala's story to Dharmaraya**, who has just lost his kingdom. This literary setup isn't just a narrative device—it carries rich symbolic meaning relevant to today's political and administrative systems.

Consider this: In Indian mythological tradition, there are **four great kings** who, despite royal birth and power, were **stripped of their status**, lived in exile, faced great personal suffering, and ultimately **returned stronger as ideal rulers**:

- Rama
- Satyagarishchandra
- Nala
- Dharmaraya (Yudhishtira)

These kings descended from the throne into the forest—from **power to powerlessness, from palace to hardship**—and in doing so, **gained deep insight** into the lives of ordinary people. They came face to face with:

- Lack of basic resources
- Alien environments and unfamiliar food
- The need to rely on others' generosity
- Cultures and customs outside their own

Only **after** undergoing this transformative “fire test” did they return to rule—**not as mere kings, but as enlightened leaders**, committed to fairness, empathy, and justice.

This concept has **profound relevance** for **today’s democratic systems**.

In our time, we need political leaders and administrators who don’t simply sit at the top of hierarchies, but who:

- **Understand the lived reality of the common citizen**
- **Engage directly with the lowest levels of governance**
- **Undergo practical and emotional training** before assuming power

The story of Nala—his fall into misfortune, his trials in the forest, his return to kingship—can be seen as a **metaphor for ethical leadership**. True leaders, like Nala after exile, are those who have known suffering, who have been stripped of ego, and who have learned humility.

In this light, *Nalacharite* offers a timeless **lesson in governance**:

Power should not be inherited or assumed without experiential wisdom.

Perhaps, in today’s context—where leadership is often disconnected from ground realities—we must reinforce the idea that **true authority comes only after one has been tested by life itself**.

Thus, this mythological model subtly suggests that **before taking on leadership roles**, individuals should:

- **Undergo intensive practical training**
- **Experience empathy through adversity**
- **Cultivate moral clarity through hardship**

This is not a call for literal exile, but rather a call to **rethink how we prepare people for power**.

The story of Nala, as retold by Kanakadasa and contextualized by Dr. Nikethan, becomes not just an ancient tale—but a **mirror to our times**, asking whether we are building a society where **leaders earn the moral right to lead**.

Nalapaka and the Gender Politics of Cooking – Rethinking Domestic Labor

One of the most **relevant and contemporary moments** in *Nalacharite* is the depiction of **Nala as a cook**—a section commonly referred to as *Nalapaka* (Nala the cook). Here, Nala, once a great king, takes on the role of **head chef in another ruler’s palace** after being exiled and stripped of his identity.

This image—that of a man, a former king, cooking—becomes a **rich symbol** for modern reflections on **gender roles and domestic labor**.

Traditionally, the **kitchen is seen as a woman’s domain**, especially in Indian households. Yet, in large-scale public functions or temple rituals, we still **rarely see women in the role of head chefs or supervisors**.

Why is it that:

- **In private spaces, women are expected to cook,**
- **But in public culinary professions, it is men who dominate and are celebrated?**

This discrepancy is partly because ancient stories and religious history often portray **great cooks as male figures**—Nala, Bhima, and Banasura, for instance.

These mythological metaphors have **trickled into everyday social roles**, contributing to how cooking has been divided between:

- **Unpaid, domestic labor** (done mostly by women)
- And **skilled, professional labor** (often monopolized by men)

But *Nalapaka* challenges this very notion.

It shows a **king willingly taking on kitchen duties**—not as a humiliation, but as a practical skill and honorable livelihood.

By doing so, it opens up the idea that:

1. **Men too belong in the kitchen**, not just at the helm of public cooking roles, but also **in everyday domestic spaces**
2. Women, likewise, are **fully capable of taking charge** in large public and professional kitchens

Even though this might sound like a simple point, it forces us to **rethink entrenched beliefs** about gendered labor.

It undermines the stereotypical view that the kitchen is a woman's burden but a man's profession.

So, while *Nalacharite* might seem like a traditional epic, it **quietly disrupts** deeply embedded patriarchal norms.

It invites us to imagine **a more egalitarian world**—where labor is shared, dignity is universal, and **no task is devalued by gender**.

The Healing Power of Nalacharite – Literature as Lifeline

In exploring the relevance of *Nalacharite* for today's readers, one final, crucial point must be emphasized: **its narrative structure and emotional rhythm** make it deeply **accessible, engaging, and uplifting**. The poetic flow of *Nalacharite* effortlessly draws the reader in with curiosity and feeling.

This quality has made it one of the **most impactful works in Kannada literature**—especially when staged or performed.

Whether read by children or the elderly, its storyline resonates with audiences because it is:

- Emotionally rich
- Spiritually elevating
- Simple yet profound in narration

The epic is filled with evocative episodes:

- The blossoming of love between Nala and Damayanti
- Their forced separation and aching longing (*viraha*)
- The symbolic *hamsa vaani*—a divine goose acting as a messenger (like a mythical version of a mobile text!)
- The incident with the deadly snake *Karkotaka*
- The sorrowful moment when birds steal Nala's last clothes
- The cruel trials they both endure—so harsh they wouldn't be wished even on an enemy
- And finally, their emotional reunion and return to grace

Each scene in *Nalacharite* is painted vividly, **as if stitched with narrative jewels**.

But above all, *Nalacharite* speaks most powerfully to **those struggling with despair**.

In a world where people, especially the young, often fall into hopelessness or even contemplate **suicide for minor setbacks**, *Nalacharite* becomes a **life-affirming force**.

What it offers is **not mere moral preaching**, but a lived example of resilience:

In the face of overwhelming loss and hardship, do not give up.
Suffering can be endured, and **dignity reclaimed**.

It teaches us:

- To **not let adversity break our spirit**
- That even in pain, the will to live must be kept alive
- That **faith, effort, and compassion** can lead us back into life's sweetness

This is not just spiritual counsel—it is **psychological strength**.

Kanakadasa, through this tale, sets aside his usual theological themes of birth, caste, and salvation to gift us **a timeless story of perseverance and grace**. In *Nalacharite*, he offers us a **life philosophy** grounded in hope—where setbacks are temporary, and renewal is always possible.

So today, even if **we forget Kanaka the saint, or Kanaka the caste icon**, *we must remember Kanaka the humanist*, whose literary voice whispers:

Live on. There is more to be. More to become.

