

LIGHTNING PROTECTION AND RITUALS IN ANCIENT INDIAN TEXTS

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Abstract—Lightning has been a natural source of electrical energy from time immemorial. Vedic literature and Post-Vedic literature term it as ‘Vidyut’, ‘Ashani’, ‘Stanayitnu’ and so on, although the meanings differ. Purported to be a cause of injury, the seers described means of protection from it through special rituals that are discussed in the paper.

Keywords- Lightning, Vidyut, Shanti, Tree, House

INTRODUCTION

Lightning was a natural Electrical phenomenon observed by man from ancient times that aroused his curiosity and reverence for this mysterious and still incompletely understood Divine power. Vedic literature refers to the term ‘Vidyut’ and it occurs in different contexts and meanings. From grammatical principles, it is a feminine gender word and is expressed as *ivze;e[*aette*, (*viçeñeëa dyotate*) ‘something having a special brilliance’. Yaska’s *Nirukta* and *Sāyaëcārya’s Bhashya* consider these meanings. Although the word may not be directly associated with lightning in Vedic texts, in some contexts, Post-Vedic texts do certainly describe the natural phenomenon of lightning. Lightning is associated with a vast mythology and its devastating effect on people and property is calamitous. It may strike during any time, season or place and generally its strike is considered inauspicious during which some rituals are to be offered and protection is to be taken care of. Ancient Indian texts widely speak of lightning strike on trees, men, cattle, buildings, temples, palaces and granaries. They also describe the purificatory rituals to be done for them, the efficacy of the soil or tree struck by lightning.

LIGHTNING STRIKING A TREE, HOUSE OR PERSON

Several beliefs exist among ancient people about lightning strikes although they haven’t been well documented. Fruit bearing trees are driven by iron nails to prevent lightning from striking them. The Munda tribes kill enemies by a cotton seed sown on ground manured with ashes of a tree struck by lightning. When it grows, a bow is made from it and an effigy of the enemy is shot at¹. The Birhors believe that bugs cease to infest a hut when it is smoked with smoke of fire kindled with wood of a tree struck by lightning². Kannikars of Kallar believe that lightning ‘*Äciyiöi*’ destroys trees and grass while ‘*Kuøuriöi*’ does not destroy the tree but only peels off the bark³. There exists belief that a man struck by lightning is a great sinner. People also believe that a house will not be struck by lightning if a coconut tree stands in front of the entrance. In Orissan temples, obscene erotic postures on temples act as protectors of lightning as it is believed

1. ‘Ethnographic Notes and Queries’, *Man in India*, Vol. 1, No. 1, March 1921, p.67-74.

2. ‘Ethnographic Notes and Queries’, *Man in India*, Vol. 1, No.4, December 1921.

3. Krishna Iyer, L. A. (ed.), *Travancore Tribes and Castes*, Vol.1, 1937, Govt. Press, Trivandrum, p.1-80.

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that Indra does not harm a couple in supreme enjoyment⁴. The Gonds of Central provinces believe that trees which exude milky juice are most likely to attract lightning. Cases of lightning striking Mahua trees (*Madhuca latifolia*) are reported⁵. Folk beliefs exist that one who survives a lightning stroke becomes rich⁶. Farmers in Dutch countries plant birch trees around houses to protect them against lightning. It is said that birch paper keeps writings safe⁷. Most of the manuscripts written on Bhurjapatra (*Betula bhojpatra*) may be because of this belief.

These beliefs of lightning strikes are echoed as early in certain Vedic literature. The *Taittiriya Brahmana* TB 1.1.3.12 says *sambhara* (7 items from earth and 6 items from trees) to be scattered at site of *Gārhapatya* sacrificial altar from a tree struck by lightning. The *Arthavāda* while glorifying it states that Maruts struck Agni with waters and grabbed his heart. It became lightning⁸. The same is echoed by the *Āpastambha Ārauta Sūtra* (V.2.4) which enumerates a tree struck by lightning as *sambhara* along with other trees in the *Agnyādihāna* ritual⁹ as well as in the *Kāöhaka Saähitā* 8.2.12 mentioning a tree struck by lightning¹⁰. The rite of house building represented by *Atharvaveda Samhita* AV 3.12 involves a *Çyeëayāga* wherein a hymn addressed to the Divine eagle (lightning) says that the house shall not be struck by lightning, the eagle looking for a resting place shall come kindly together with his friend Indra. Here *Suparna* may be associated with Agni whose form is the Heavenly fire in the form of Lightning¹¹. This meaning can be concluded as the *Çatapatha Brähmaëa* SB 6.1.3.18 says that *Ashani* is one of the forms of Agni¹². The *Baudhāyana Ārauta Sūtra* 9.17 says that if lightning strikes one should offer into *Gārhapatya* fire an oblation by means of spoon with one of the hymns from among as would suit the form (of lightning)¹³. The *Bhāradvāja Ārauta Sūtra* also prescribes a similar ritual in context of Pravargya ritual when lightning strikes¹⁴. Many

4. Roy, S. N., 'Some common superstitions of rural people', *Journal of Anthropological Society Bombay*, Vol. XIV, No. 6, 1930, p. 732-742.
5. Maitland, V. K., 'Mahua trees and lightning', *Indian Forester*, Vol. LXX, Nov. 1944, p.391.
6. Ramegowda, M. C. Vasantkumar (eds.), 'Folk beliefs in Kannada', Prabhuddha prakashana, Mysore-6, p. 27.
7. From website www.dutchie.org/Tracy/trees/celtic_tree_birch.html
8. Dange, Sindhu S., 'Trees in Vedic ritual tradition', *Journal of Bombay Royal Asiatic Society*, Vol. 76, 2001, p.9-20.
9. Narasimhachar (ed.), *The Ārauta Sūtra of Āpastambha with Bhāñyā of Dhūrtasvāmi and vātti of Rāmāgnacit (Prashnas 1-5)*, Oriental Research Institute Library Series No. 87, University of Mysore, 1945, p.60.
10. *Ārauta Kosha*, Vol. I – Sanskrit section (7 Havis sacrifices with relevant rites etc), Vaidik Samshodhan Mandal, Poona, 1958, p.10 of *Agnyādihāna* chapter.
11. Maurice Bloomfield, *The Atharvaveda and Gopatha Brahmana*, p.80. Also see Joshi, K. L., *Atharvaveda Samhita with English translation according to W. D. Whitney and Sāyaëäcārya Bhāñyā*, Parimal Publications, New Delhi, Vols.1-3. 2004, p. 42-43.
12. *Çatapatha Brähmaëa according to Mādhyandina recension with commentary of Sāyaëäcārya and Hariswamin*, Nag Publishers, Delhi, 5 Vols, 1990, p. 28 of Vol. 3.
13. Dandekar, R. N., *Ārauta Koça*, Vol. II, Pt. 3 (English section)- Other six forms of Soma sacrifice, Vaidik Samshodhan Mandal, Poona, 1995, p.208.
14. *Ibid*, p.225.

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Dharmasutras prescribe discontinuing of study (of Veda) during lightning strikes. The *Matsya Purāëam* (CCLVII.5-6) forbids the use of wood of a tree struck by lightning in the process of house building¹⁵.

TEXTS DEALING ON RITUALS PERTAINING TO LIGHTNING STRIKES

Dharmashastraic texts enumerate the rites to be performed when lightning strikes a tree, person or house. In this regard, several manuscripts exist in various repositories of which many have not been published. A brief detail of such works is listed below-

1. *Açanihata çäntiù*¹⁶-

Acc. No. 3240

Folios- Begins on fol. 136a of mss Acc. No. 2898 (*Arkavivāha* of Vol.V-Dharmashastra), Complete

Size- 13×1 $\frac{1}{2}$ inches

Pages- 4

Lines per page- 6

Language- Sanskrit

Script-Nandinagari

Details- Rites for averting inauspiciousness of lightning stroke (By Bodhayana) taken from *Ashanihatakalpa*

Beginning - vsNte çl:me zrid kale va devg&he àasade rajg&he çammXye gaeóe jnsmUhe SvsmUhe xnxaNysm&ïe (smUhe) b&Ndavne pnsnairke;³muktévncUtvnaNtre Azinhte va zt³tusxane (Swane) yjmanSy JeÇaiÉv&iï>

Ends - äaü[aNÉaejiyTva ywazi' di][aNddait AacayaRy di][aNddaTyzinhtSy zaiNtÉRiv:ytITyah Égvā! baexayn>

Colophon - #it baexaynae'azinhtzaiNt>.

2. *Açanihata präyaçcittam*¹⁷-

Acc. No. 3469

Folios- Begins on Fol. 207b of mss Acc. No.1197 (*Äpastambhagāhyaprayogadēpikā* of Vol. II-Vedic literature), Complete.

Size- 8 $\frac{1}{8}$ ×6 $\frac{3}{8}$ inches

Pages- 9 Pages

Lines- 15 lines per page

Language - Sanskrit

Script- Telugu

15. Nag Sharan Singh, *Matsya Purāëam with English translation of H. H. Wilson*, Nag Publishers, New Delhi,

1997, Vol. II, p.1113.

16. Rangacharya, M., Rao Bahadur, *Descriptive Catalogue of Sanskrit manuscripts*, Vol. VI, Class 4, Dharmashastra, Madras Govt. Oriental manuscripts Library, 1909, p.2443.

17. *Ibid*, Vol. VII- Dharmashastra (contd.), p.2601.

Details- Regarding purificatory funeral rites to be done when one is killed by lightning.
Beginning - Aagavae AGmÚut ÉÔm³NTsldNtu %peNÔ tvlyeR, #TyNt<
ctuòy vaKyE> àTyˆc< ju÷yat!, svRÇ gae_yaimdm!, APsu mr[àayiiĀm!, #m< me
vé[tĀvayaimit Ōa_yam! AzinhṭàayiiĀ< c,
Ends - AòMya< va ctudRZya< pĀdZya< iÇjNmin, tEl< ma<s< Vyvay< c dNtkaó< c
vjRyet!.

Colophon - AzinhṭàayiiĀivxan< smaÝm!.

3. Aṇanihata ṇāntiù ¹⁸-

Acc. No. 3536

Folios- Begins on fol. 14b of mss Acc. No.3239, Complete.

Size- 13×1½ inches

Pages- 4 Pages

Lines- 7 lines per page

Language- Sanskrit

Script- Nandinagari

Details- On shanti to be performed when houses, temples, palaces are struck by lightning.

Beginning - Similar to Bodhayana's text. Further adds Aa¶eYya< rajraò+ivnaznm!,
yaMya< (My) Swane gaexnxaNy ivnaznm!,

Ends - AacayaRy shòdi][a< ddait, Azinhṭ zaiNtÉRvtITyah Égvan! baexayn>,
Colophon - #it AzinhṭziNt smaÝm!.

4. Aṇanipātaṇāntiù ¹⁹-

Acc. No.- 4011(i), 4423(m), 4664(m).

Script – Telugu

Details – Complete, Prayoga.

5. Aṇanipātaprāyaṇcittam ²⁰- Several manuscripts

a) Acc. No. P4907/34, Palm leaf (PL), Grantha script, Size - 44×3.8 cms, Fol. 150-152,
9 lines per page, Complete, From *Pauñkara saàhitā*.

b) Acc. No. P3481/1, Palm leaf (PL), Grantha script, Size-33×4 cms, Fol. 1-9, 10 lines
per page, Complete, From *Pauñkara saàhitā*

c) Acc. No. P4984/45, Palm leaf (PL), Grantha script, Size-40×3 cms , Fol. 236-238, 7
lines per page, Complete, From *Pauñkara saàhitā*

Beginning – àat> sNXyasu velaya< pUryeCDĒmev tu, tĀTkale c yCĀ,Tva
muCyte svR patkE>.

àasade gÉRgehe c m{qpe zuknaiske, àakare gaepure va=w SvplQe bilplQke.

18. Rangacharya, M., Rao Bahadur, *Opcit*, Vol. VII- Dharmashastra (contd.), p. 2662.

19. *Alphabetical Index of Sanskrit, Telugu and Tamil manuscripts (palm leaf and paper) in Sri Venkateshwara Oriental Research Institute Library*, Tirupathi, 1956, Prepared under orders of Board of trustees, Tirupathi Tirumala Devasthanam.

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Ends - %'ÔVye[mitman! di][a< dapyeÄt>, äaü[an! ÉaejyeTpía*wa ivÄanusart>.
@v< ³me[
ivàeNÔ àayiiÄ< smacret!, Ak«te)lhain> SyÚazyetSvRmevtu.
Colophon - #it paÂraÇe mhaepin;id paE:krs<ihtaya< AzinpatàayiiÄpql>.

- d) Acc. No. P4977/21, Palm leaf (PL), Grantha script, Size- 44.5×4.5 cms, Fol. 36-38, 7 lines per page, Complete, From *Pauñkara saàhitä*.
e) Acc. No. P4907/38, Palm leaf (PL), Grantha script, Size- 44×3.8 cms, Fol. 153-155, 9 lines per page, Complete, From *Brahmasaàhitä*.

Beginning - Awa=tSs<àvúyaim Azinàae][³mm!, narden puraàae' < zaô†ò(a ywaeidtm!.

××××× . Aalye gÉRgehe c gaepure muom{fpe. ××××. ×××××× .
Ends - tlamae yjmaní raja raò+< ivnZyit, tSmaTsvRàyÆen àae][< c smacret!.
Colophon - #itilpaÂraÇe äüs<ihtaya< Azinpatàae][< nam pÂazae=Xyay>.

- f) Acc. No. P3481/2, Palm leaf (PL), Grantha script, Size- 33×2 cms, Fol. 9-19, 10 lines per page, Complete, From *Pauñkara saàhitä*.

6. *Vaidyutägniçäntiù*²¹–

Acc. No. 3431

Folios- Begins on Fol. 39a of mss Acc. No.3232 (*Adhbhutotpataçäntiù* of Vol. 6 - Dharmashastra), Complete.

Size – 11½×1 inches

Pages- 3 Pages

Lines- 4 lines per page

Language - Sanskrit

Script –Telugu

Details- On shanti to be performed if lightning strikes a house. (according to Saunaka).

Colophon - #it zaEnklye iv*udi¶zaiNtSsmaÝa,

7. *Vidyutpāta çäntiù*²²–

Acc. No. 3422

Folios- Begins on Fol.23b of mss Acc. No.2898 (*Arkavivaha* of Vol. V- Dharmashastra), Complete.

Size - 13×1½ inches

Pages – 2

Lines - 6 lines per page

Language - Sanskrit

Script – Nandinagari

Details- Regarding ceremony for averting evil consequences of lightning striking a house.

20. Dr. Malladevaru, H. P., *Descriptive catalogue of Sanskrit manuscripts*, Vol. XV, Agama and Nighantu, Oriental research Institute, Mysore, 1987, p. 166 and Appendix p. 213-214.

21. Rangacharya, M., Rao Bahadur, *Opcit.*, Vol. VII- Dharmashastra (contd.), p. 2577.

Ends - pavnae'en mÙe[karyediÉ;ecnm!, ttStu àitmadan< k...yaRÓ+aü[Éaejnm!
Colophon - #it iv*uÉTpatzaiNt>.

8. Vidyutpāta çāntiū²³–

Acc. No. 3423

Folios- Begins on Fol. 40a of mss Acc. No.2840 (*Aupāsanam* of Vol. V – Dharmashastra), Complete.

Size – 13 $\frac{1}{2}$ × 1 $\frac{1}{2}$ inches

Pages – 2

Lines - 7 lines per page

Language - Sanskrit

Script - Grantha.

Details- Regarding ceremony for averting evil consequences of lightning striking a house.

9. Vidyudagninā Dagdhagāhaçāntiū²⁴–

From *Çaunaka kārīkā*, a medieval treatise on Hindu rites.

veZm]eÇaidGxe;uvE*utenai¶na yid te;a< zaiNt< àvúyaim zaEnkae=h< iÖjNmnam!.

tiSmNdeze janumaÇ< gÄj oaTvaedk< isÂet! il)lmka<íEv inxay SviSt vacyet!.

gÄRSy píme deze haem< k...yaRdœ iÖjaeÄm> #XmaxanaidpyRNt< y}tÙ< smapyet!.

%plepaidk< svj mXy @vaJyÉagyae> AaJya÷tl> z<vtliÉjuR÷yadi¶mçt>.

s àÆwa shseit sU´en ju÷yaliv> tt> iSvòk«t< ÷Tva haemze;< smapyet!.

A¶eéÄrtiStón! SvSTyaÇey< jpeTpun> äaü[aNÉaejyeÄÇ ywazi´ c di][am!.

tdi¶dGx< ivÉ;e àd*at! äaü[ay tu àai[dGxe;u sveR;u ihr{y< di][a Évet!.

10. Açanipātaçāntiū - The New Catalogus Catalogorum²⁵ cites several other such manuscripts of which those with the title *Açanipātaçāntiū* are many and are listed below-

a) Acc. No. 13437

Shastri, P. P. S., *Descriptive catalogue of Sanskrit mss. in Tanjore Maharaja Serfoji's Saraswathi Mahal Library*, Tanjore.

b) Acc. No. 1418A-22 , Also 3007F-18, 8768C

A handlist of Sanskrit mss. acquired for Travancore University Manuscripts Library, Trivandrum, see *Alphabetical Index of Sanskrit mss. in University Mss. Library*, Trivandrum, Vol. I (A to Na) 1957, Vol. II (Ta to Ma) 1965.

22. Rangacharya, M., Rao Bahadur, *Opcit.*, Vol. VI- Dharmashastra, p. 2571.

23. *Ibid.*, p. 2571.

24. Dr. Sulok Sundar Mohanty, *Saunaka Karika*, Medha Indological Publications, Jagatsinghpur, Orissa, 1999, p.243.

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- c) Acc. No. – MT. 437 Fol. (9b-10a), 1314 (h)
A Triennial Catalogue of Sanskrit manuscripts in Govt. Oriental Manuscripts library, Madras. Rangacharya, M., Kuppuswami Shastri, S.
- d) Acc. No. – PUL. I. p.78
Catalogue of Sanskrit mss. in Punjab University Library, Lahore. Vol. I, 1932 and Vol. II, 1941.
- e) Acc. No. Udaipur. II.14, 51 (known as *Açanidagdhacântiù*).
A handlist of mss. in library of Nathdwara, Udaipur, Mewar state.

11. *Açanipätaprokñäëä*²⁶ – Taylor. I. 144

William Taylor, *A Catalogue Raisonnee of Oriental manuscripts in library of the (late) College, Fort Saint George now in charge of Board of examiners, Vols I-III., Madras, 1857, 1860, 1862.*

A brief overview of all these manuscripts highlights that there were two schools of thought on rituals to ward off the inauspicious effects of lightning strikes- one by Bodhayana and another by Saunaka. A third school of thought is propounded in *Päïcarättra* texts speaking of the schools of Narada and Paushkara. Bodhayana's text is interesting as it reveals the places where lightning strikes occur for which shanti is to be performed. It also mentions the trees struck by lightning like *Panasa* (*Artocarpus integrifolia*), *Närikeøa* (*Cocos nucifera*), *Kramuka* (*Symplocos crataegoides*), *Cüta/Mango* (*Mangifera indica*) as in the first manuscript. The 7th, 8th and 9th Manuscripts cited above belong rightfully to the Saunaka school and states that the rites be performed at the site where lightning struck (*tasmindeçe*), by filling a pit with *Çréphala* (*Aegle marmelos*) and chanting Svasti mantras. To the west of it, a sacrificial altar is to be set for performing the sacrifice offering *Äjya* with chanting of mantras from *Rigveda* RV. 7.35.1-13 and RV. 1.96.1 *süktä*²⁷. To the north of sacrificial altar, one has to chant the Svastis. This is to be followed by a feast to the Brahmanas with *dakñiëä*. If a person is killed by the stroke, the *dakñiëä* should be fully in terms of gold. Bodhayana's texts stresses on other mantras like those of RV 6.28.1 and RV. 1.25.19.

POST-VEDIC LITERATURE ON RITUALS OF LIGHTNING STROKES

The *Båhat Saàhitä* of Varahamihira²⁸ even as early as 6th c. A.D. speaks of Vajralepas in chapter 57. Although, the *Çilparatna* of Srikumara, Bhoja's *Samaräigaëasütradhära* and *Mayämatam* give various methods of its preparations, its

25. Dr. V. Raghavan, *New Catalogus Catalogorum – An Alphabetical register of Sanskrit and allied works and authors*, Vol. 1, University of Madras, 1969, p. 432.

26. *Ibid.*, p.432.

terming as vE*utÉSm (vaidyutabhasma) suggests its relation to lightning. This can be traced to the *Matsya Purāëam* (II.9.31) which cites a plaster to avoid danger from a fire²⁹ –
 samuÔsENxvyva iv*uíGxa c m&iÄka, tyanuuiYm! yÖeZm nai¶na dýte n&p.

Elsewhere the text of *Bâhat Saâhitä* speaks of the death omen when a crow caws seated on a tree struck by lightning³⁰.

The *Bhadrabâhu Saâhitä* of Jain Bhikshu Bhadrabahu³¹ dated earlier than the text of Varahamihira mentions of lightning striking a tree or house as-

yda ñeta=æv&]Sy iv*uiCDris s<cret!, Aw va g&hyaemRXye vatv; j s&jeNmht!.

The *Adhbhuta Sägara* of Vallalasenadeva³² (11th c. A. D.), a text on portents etc speaks of rituals in chapter titled ‘*Vidyudadhbhutävarta*’ and highlights the performance of sacrifice with offerings poured in by chanting Savitri mantras ten lakh times.

The *BâhatSärigadhara Paddhatté* of *Särigadhara*³³, a text of 14th c.A.D., speaks of the efficacy of the ashes of a tree struck by lightning for protection-

Aw Ô,mr]a> -

iv*udahtv&]Sy ÉUitmaday svRt>, r]at; ivikrede;a< twa n ihmbaxnm!, diYaePyi¶> zm< yaitv; dGxÔ,m ÉSmna.

Under the section titled ‘*Vidyudväraëam*’ it throws interesting details as follows-

jEiminí sumNtuí vEzMpayn @v c, pulSTy> pulhae iv:[u> ;fete v;var[a>.

mune> kLya[mÛSy jEimneiaip kltRnat!, iv*udi¶Éy< naiSt iliote tu g&haedre.

kdMbv&]sarStu iv*upatinvar[>, iv*uTpatSy nae ÉlitdeRvrajeit kltRnat!.

ramr]a< pQe*Stu raÇaE va yid va idva, n tSy ÊòicÄe_yae Éy< k...Çaip iv*te.

It mentions that writing the names or mantras associated with sages- *Jaimini*, *Sumantu*, *Vaiçampäyaëa*, *Pulastya*, *Pulaha*, *Viñëu* on doors of houses wards of all fears of fires caused by lightning (stroke). It also highlights the efficacy in *sära* (essence) of Kadamba tree (*Anthocephalus cadamba*) as mentioned by Lord Indra. Chanting of *Râmarakñä* stotra protects one from all fears.

It is strange as to how these sages got associated with a lightning protection custom and the earlier Vedic literature may have to be studied to associate myths of lightning with them. Thus one can observe that lightning was a divine energy whose powers were understood by our ancient sages. Since, it had a devastating or destroying power that was considered inauspicious various *shanti*’s had to be performed.

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27. Ravi Prakash Arya, K. L. Joshi, *Rigveda Samhita with English translation according to H. H. Wilson and Sayanacharya Bhashya*, Vols. I-IV, Parimal Publications, Delhi, 2005.

28. Ramakrishna Bhat, M., *Varahamihira’s Brihat Samhita*, Motilal Banarsidass Publishers, New Delhi, 1981, Vol.I-II.

29. Nag Sharan Singh, Opcit.

30. Ramakrishna Bhat, M., Vol. 2, XCV.36, p. 837.

31. Nemichandra Shastry (ed.), *Bhadrabahu Samhita*, Bharatiya Jnanapitha, New Delhi, 2001, Chap.V.17, p.66.

32. Pt. Murali Dhara Jha, *Adhbhuta Sagara of Vallalasenadeva*, Prabhakari and Co., Benares, 1905, p.353.

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31. Dr. Peter Peterson, *Bāhat SāriḡadharaPaddhati* , Bombay Sanskrit and Prakrit series No. 37, Govt. Central Book Depot Bombay, 1888.