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Kalidasa: A biography

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Abstract

Kalidasa was one of the most accomplished Sanskrit poet and dramatist. The literature of Sanskrit is incomplete without him. Kalidasa is the soul of our cultural heritage and as students of literature, we find different versions of his birth and life.

Keywords: Mahakavi, dramatist, poet

Introduction

How paradoxical it is, that clouds of skepticism surround the legacy of the great maestro. We do not possess sufficient information about the poet, except few assumptions and legends. His works have come down to us anonymous, as no name is affixed to these works. Whatever information we have is derived from references to him by other poets and writers, researchers, commentaries on his works and inscriptions.

Since there are various legends and interpretations of the life of the Mahakavi, it has become difficult to render the exact biographic details to the life in which the great dramatist unfolded and fulfilled himself. So much was his self-effacement that it is said, even the real name of the poet is unknown to the world. A few assumptions regarding the etymology of his name are available. Like many other names in Sanskrit literature, his name is descriptive too. The word Kalidasa means the votary or the servant of Goddess Kali. It is the name that he earned for being a devout worshipper of Kali. Kali is also the feminine form of "Time", so Kalidasa can also be translated as servant of time. Legend says that Kalidasa was a fool who was married to the Princess Vidhyottama out of conspiracy. Vidhyottama was a beautiful and intellectually endowed erudite girl, who had pledged to marry the person who would defeat her in shastrartha. Since she had defeated many learned scholars and Brahmins who considered their defeat incomprehensible, grudgingly took to revenge on Vidhyottama. So they took the uneducated fool Kalidasa whom they saw cutting the very branch of the tree he was sitting on, to contest the shastrartha with Vidhyottama.

In the court, prior to the debate, Vidhyottama was falsely informed that Kalidasa was a very reputed and learned scholar who was practicing silence and hence would hold a mute debate. And as legend further tells, Vidhyottama showed one finger to Kalidasa, by which she meant "Shakti is one." Kalidasa thought that the princess aims to poke his one eye, so he reciprocated by showing two fingers which meant that he would poke both her eyes. But Vidhyottama accepted the convincing answer as "Shakti is manifest in duality that is Shiv-Shakti, nar-nari." She then showed her palm meaning the five elements of earth, which was interpreted by Kalidasa as a slap, to which he showed his fist, but which Vidhyottama rendered as the unity of five elements. Gracefully accepting her defeat and unaware of the conspiracy of the Brahmins, she married Kalidasa.

On revelation that Kalidasa was an ill-literate rough and uncouth boy, Vidhyottama shuns him out of the house, and asks him to return only after acquiring knowledge and only after being enlightened with the answer to the following question:

Asti Kaschit Vagarthiyam meaning "Is there anything special in expression?" Jilted by wife, Kalidasa considered the insult as a challenge, and devotedly served Goddess Kali seeking her blessings. It is said he appeased the Goddess who granted him all knowledge, and when he returned to Vidhyottama, as an answer to her question, he offered his literary works and each work beginning with one of the words of the question propounded by her. With Asti, he wrote Astiuttarasyaam and began his work Kumarsambhav. With Kashit he wrote Kaschit

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Virahgunoo and composed his poem Meghduta and with Vaagarthiviva he wrote Vaagarthaaviva sampritko and began his epic poem Raghuvansham.

Another tradition holds that Kalidasa was a simple, unlettered Brahmin youth, endowed with uncommon beauty and grace of manners. Left orphaned at six-months, he was brought up by the driver of an ox-cart. Through devout praying of Goddess Kali, he not only attained the gift of poetry, drama and profound learning but also acquired his name. Thus the name Kalidasa could equate equally to three meanings of the word Kali_Goddess Kali, Time and Creative power.

Similarly shrouded in mystery is the birthplace of the veteran. Although the poet has left certain clues about it. People of various regions in Indian subcontinent like Kashmir, Vidharbha, Bengal and Ujjain have laid claim to the honour of being the great poet's birthplace. But Ujjayini in Malwa (ancient Avanti) seems to be the relevant birthplace, because the opulent and intricate description with which the poet explicates the splendor and geographical distribution of the place proves that only an indigenous person could do so.

Kalidasas Yaksha in Meghduta, says to the rain clouds admonishing them not to miss the chance to visit Ujjain "Indeed you would have lived in vain".

In Meghduta Kalidasa very opulently describes the grooves, fields, palaces, mansions and gardens of Ujjayini. Nature is described in its full splendour and glory. Kalidasa also reveals an intimate knowledge of the Malwa region of the Vindhya mountains. Through the journey of the cloud, he traces the entire topography of the ranges and with such geographical precision and exactitude as if the map of the region had been traced on his palm. There are many other references which indicate Ujjayini to be the poets native place. Kalidasa celebrates the glory of Ujjayini not only for its beauty, and wealth but also because it's a place of hierophany. This ancient city is one of the twelve heirophanic spots in the country, where lord Shiva descended into Time and Space to abide as a terrestrial presence for the salvation of the godly. Ujjayini has historically been an important city, cosmopolitan in nature, possessing a rich culture and cultivated citizens. It is here from where the Greenwich of ancient India passed. It has also been the centre of learning and intellectual activity, and perhaps the Sanskrit drama developed here under the patronage of merchant princes and kings. This city was ruled by the Great King Vikramaditya. Vikramaditya began the "Vikram Samvat" or Vikram era in 57 BCE which was a mark to commemorate his victory over the Saaka (Scythian) kings-the invaders of Malwa. Historian Ferguson also validates this account. Vikramaditya himself an ardent lover of art and literature, was also the patron of poets and scholars. Kalidasa was supposed to be the court poet and wrote under the patronage of the king. The shloka below talks about the nine gems of the king.

The shloka says that: There were nine brilliant gems in the court of Vikramaditya named Dhanvantri, Kshapanka, Amarasimha, Sanku, Vetalabhatta, Ghatakarpara, Kalidasa, Varahamihira and Vararuchi. All the gems of the court were well acquainted with contemporary science, geography, arts, politics and astronomy, and Kalidasa was the brightest of them all. There have also been veiled references to the king Vikramaditya in the poets works which therefore date back to 57 B.C. or the first century.

According to these inscriptions, Kalidasa was born in the Avanti Janpad. He was honoured by Shunga King Agnimitra. Kalidasa composed all his major works namely Ritusambhara, Meghdoota, Malavikagnimitra, Raghuvansham, Kumarsambhav, Vikramoorvarshiya and Abhigyanshakuntalam during this time. The floruit of the Mahakavi cannot be dated with precision, and it had been difficult to establish the order in which they were composed. Kalidasa is also mentioned in the stone inscriptions at Jain temple of Aihole, South India, dated 634 AD.

Kalidasa spent his last days under the patronship of King Vikramaditya and at a very tender age of fourteen years, he left for the heavenly abode, which is dated somewhere towards the beginning of Vikram Samvat.

The legend further says that there was a courtesan in the Singhalese court who out of jealousy and greed of the prize money, got Kalidasa murdered. It is said that on the funeral pyre of Kalidasa, the King also threw himself, as a mark of respect and tribute to his friend.

Kalidasa thus left this mortal world, but the corpus of his great immortal works, like the sun, is shining in all its splendor even today.

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