

FOREWORD

I REMEMBER HOW painful it was to study Sanskrit in English translation in our colleges. If the student knew English well enough to enjoy its poetry, the translated text was embarrassing. The scholarly translator in English trying to be close to the text in Sanskrit virtually killed both the languages. As Professor DANIEL H.H. INGALLS remarks, any effort to be close to a highly inflected language like Sanskrit with its infinite variations of word order will produce in English “a humorous or barbarous effect.”

Learning Sanskrit in Kannada, our local language, was not as painful as it was in English for there were some, even if rare, translations like BASAPPA SHASTRY’S *Śakuntalā* in it. This translation intended for theatrical performance had to sound natural and therefore was an exception even in Kannada, for a lot of other translated poetry (*kāvya*) texts suffered from their veneration of the language of the Gods. The best of them were literal and analytical, and intended for students who chose Kannada as their language of instruction. Mallinātha’s commentary was their base structure and sent you back to the original.

“The Birth of Kumāra” (*Kumārasambhava*) of Kālidāsa was praised, but the cantos from *Raghuvamśa* or the play, *Śakuntalā*, were usually prescribed as texts in class. I don’t think that in post-colonial India, with its inherited Victorian taste and Puritanism, *Kumārasambhava* was ever set as a text with all its eight cantos for undergraduate students. In his edition of *Kumārasambhava* with all eight cantos, M.R. KALE adds this note: “It must however be remarked here

that the poet, in his zeal to describe a lover just married, has spoiled his character Śiva, which he had well maintained in the first six cantos.” Perhaps he has the authority of Ānanda-
vardhana to back him. At the same time, a scholar like KALE does not forget to mention that the eighth canto is a crowning achievement of Kālidāsa’s poetic art, for quotations are taken from the eighth canto in standard critical works like *Sarasvatikanṭhābharana* of Bhoja (eleventh century).

While respecting the balance that old scholars maintain in such matters, I ask myself if there is a greater “radical-liberalist” and “humanist-aesthetic” reason for our admiration and awe before the intensity of the erotic element we find in *Kumārasambhava* where a God copulates with a Goddess. D.H. LAWRENCE in “Lady Chatterley’s Lover,” and M.F. HUSSAIN in his paintings of naked Goddesses (both controversial in their countries in their times) look somewhat willful and self-conscious beside our ancient Kālidāsa. (But we must note that our ancient guru of poets was also an innovator; he himself declared that neither the past be venerated only because it was the past nor the present be decried for being the present.) Both Śiva and Pārvatī remain godlike in their intense erotic passion as well as in their intense asceticism. Ascetic penance and sensuous passion seem like two sides of the same vitality of life.



For many in the English speaking world, the study of old Indian literary works in Sanskrit was more a matter of academic scholarship. There were some exceptions in Europe, like GOETHE, for instance. This was true for the other

Indian languages too until A.K. RAMANUJAN came on the scene with his translations. His translations of *vacana* poetry from Kannada and classical poetry from Tamil read as creative writing in English. DANIEL INGALLS' translations of Sanskrit lyrical verse, which were not only acts of scholarship but poetic translations enjoyable in English, are one exception that I can think of in Sanskrit studies.

This was different with regard to the translations of other classical languages like Greek and Latin. English readers had good translations of Homer and Virgil. There were also several of them to satisfy the taste of different types of English of different ages and continents. In this sense, the CLASSICAL LIBRARY OF INDIA is a contribution to the world of international readership, giving it access to "the beauty and variety of classical Sanskrit literature."

It is important to note here that the great poetic works in Sanskrit were not translated as poetry not just in English but in our regional languages too (this is certainly the case in Kannada). The Vedic mantras were never translated in the Indian languages for the "word" itself, the very sound, was supposed to have power beyond its literal meaning. Not so with narrative Purāṇas, including the *Rāmāyana* and *Mahābhārata*. They were freely retold or adapted in our languages, for the story was important and the language was only a vehicle. But when it came to *kāvya* like *Raghuvamśa* or *Kumārasambhava*, where an aesthetic effect was intended in the joining of word and meaning (poetry is defined in an ancient Sanskrit treatise as "word and meaning united," *vāgarthau sahitaū kāvyam*), the poem was analyzed using our languages and commented upon in such a way as to

bring into our awareness what was happening in the original. It was a strategy of revisiting the original, but not real translation.

I must note here a deviation. Kālidāsa was a great influence on our Kannada high-style (*mārga*) poets like Pampa and Ponna (tenth–eleventh centuries). They even translated whole stanzas sometimes and used them in their texts, while adapting them to their chosen contexts.

For a change, we now have a translation in English, which is both true to the original and elegant as English. This is a great achievement indeed, for the poetry in English reads as convincingly as translations of Virgil and Dante in English. The book provides the original Sanskrit text also on the other side of the page, which gets re-illuminated as a result of our enjoyment of the translation as poetry in its own right.



In the words of RABINDRANATH TAGORE, *Kumārasambhava* “tells of the eternal wedding in Love, its wooing and sacrifice, and its fulfillment, for which the Gods wait in suspense. Its inner idea is deep and of all time. It asks the one question that humanity asks in all its endeavors: How is the birth of the hero to be brought about, the brave one who can defy and vanquish the evil demon laying waste heaven’s own kingdom.”

As the poem begins, we find God Śiva in the self-centered solitude of his asceticism. He is detached from the world of Reality. When Pārvatī, the spirit of reality, wins the heart of Śiva through penance and suffering, “the heroism that released Paradise from the demon of Lawlessness” is born out

of “the union of the freedom of the real with the restraint of the Good.”

It is significant that TAGORE saw a political relevance for the poem in pre-independent India. The world is under the totalitarian rule of Tārakāsura and the release from it is not through a “virgin birth” but the bodily union of God Śiva and Goddess Pārvatī. Kālidāsa was not a “mystical poet” or “spiritual” like the latter day vernacular (*deśī*) poets in Indian languages. Indra comes to Brahmā with a delegation and requests him to rescue them from the rule of Tārakāsura. Brahmā like a true statesman tells them that the Gods should initiate action by breaking the penance of Śiva, who has turned away from the world after he lost his consort Satī. He should fall in love again for the world to be revived. The Gods try to use Kāma, the God of eros, but the disturbed Śiva burns him with his third eye. Pārvatī in love with Śiva realizes her physical beauty is not enough to win over Śiva, and undertakes a severe penance herself, which emaciates her body. (Kālidāsa almost like a modern realist novelist notes that when Pārvatī’s physical charm was spurned by Śiva she was also embarrassed for it happened in front of her two maids). Her sacrificial penance wins over Śiva. Pārvatī feels fulfilled in her love but asks Śiva to take the permission of her parents and wed her. The Gods go in a delegation to request her father (as the relatives of the bridegroom still have to do in our traditional society). The wedding of Śiva and Pārvatī takes place with all the rituals that are still followed in India. It is a very earthy poem; and, while being worldly and sensuous, it includes divine beings. The Goddess of learning blesses the couple in “two-

fold”: language, using high Sanskrit for Śiva, and pleasant easy language for Pārvatī.

I want to examine the uniqueness of Kālidāsa’s *Kumārasambhava* by comparing it with a long poem in Kannada called *Girijā Kalyāṇa* (“Wedding of Goddess Daughter of the Mountain”). This was composed by Harihara, the Vīraśaiva poet, who comes after the great *vacana* poets of the twelfth century. The *vacanakaras* (some of whom A.K. RAMANUJAN translated in “Speaking of Śiva”) are not strictly poets for they did not set out to write *kāvya*. They were devotees of Śiva and also activists from a political and cultural point of view. We still find great poetry in them—but only as a by-product. Harihara, on the other hand, writes *kāvya* in the *mārga* tradition, however reluctantly. He is known as a poet of *ragale* (a form of rhymed blank verse); he tells us in these free-flowing, non-stop *ragales* the stories of the devotees of Śiva in an intensely lyrical admiration of them. He is of his time and also “modern” in many ways. We see this in his choice of non-Purāṇic stories and in his exercise of freedom from conventions of literary composition in many of his works. *Girijā Kalyāṇa* is an exception, for he wrote *campū kāvya* (mixed prose-verse poetry) like his *mārga* predecessors and chose the theme from Kālidāsa’s *Kumārasambhava*.

But the treatment of the theme in Harihara is radically different. For instance, Kālidāsa makes Śiva burn Kāma, God of Love, in a single verse, whereas Harihara makes a bonfire of Kāma in several verses. The birth of a prince of war who can destroy the demon Tāraka is not as important for Harihara as Pārvatī’s love—*bhakti*, or devotion, which

is more than love—for Śiva. Creation stops because of the penance of Śiva, and even Kāma cannot win him over. It is the penance of Pārvatī that wins him over. Pārvatī (Girijā) in Harihara is not just a polite and shy princess as in Kālidāsa. When Śiva comes to her in disguise and makes fun of the uncouth Śiva who does not deserve her, Pārvatī throws ash at him in anger and thus wins his heart. We also do not see them making physical love, as we do in Kālidāsa.

There is a great verse in *Kumārasambhava* describing Pārvatī in her intense penance (*tāpasya*). I will give two translations of the verse— from DANIEL INGALLS and DAVID SMITH to show the richness of the verse: This is INGALLS:

*Still sat Umā though scorched by various flame
Of solar fire and fires of kindled birth,
Until at summer's end the waters came,
Steam rose from her body as it rose from earth
With momentary pause the first drops rest
Upon the lash then strike her nether lip,
Fracture the ladder of her waist then trip
And slowly at her navel come to rest*

(“Sanskrit Poetry from Vidyākara’s Treasury,” p. 29)

This is from DAVID SMITH:

*Excessively heated by two fold fire,
by the sun in the sky
and fires fed by fuel,
at the end of hot season,
drenched with fresh showers,
she along with the earth
gave off rising steam.*

*Pausing a moment on her eyelashes,
 beating against her lower lip,
 breaking up in the fall
 on to the protrusion of her breasts,
 slithering into the three folds of skin below,
 the first drops of water
 eventually reached her navel.* (5.23–24)

Both translations are beautiful; but they render the graphic and the sensuous elements in the original as different mixtures. INGALLS's versification matches the formal versification in Kālidāsa whereas DAVID SMITH's is modern free verse where details are not left out. As RAMANUJAN used to say, every translation is a translation and we need several to come as close to the original as possible.

The point I want to make out of this picture of Pārvatī—associated with earth, Nature, in a Yogic posture—therefore both spiritual and sensuous—is different. I speak now from the memory of a heated conversation I had with an intense admirer of Harihara's *Girijā Kalyāṇa* who found Kālidāsa sensuously indulgent, for he notices feminine details of her body even in her penance. The divide between *mārga* and *deśī* styles (as well as their varied mixtures) is of great importance from the first poet Pampa onwards in Kannada. It is alive even in our times as it concerns matters of substance as well as composition. The *mārga-deśī* divide (as well as their varied mixtures) is of great importance from the first poet Pampa onwards in Kannada. It is alive even in our times as it concerns matters of substance as well as composition.

In one of his letters to Lady Ottoline Morrell, D.H. LAWRENCE speaks of the perfect man-woman relationship that he found in the Ajanta frescoes: "they are the zenith of a lovely civilization, the crest of a very perfect wave of human development" ("Selected Letters of D.H. Lawrence," p. 114). In the agonized last phase of his life, W.B. YEATS speaks of his "unrepentant pagan heart" and also his desire to go beyond the fleshly human existence and become a golden bird.

I wonder what they would have said of Kālidāsa's *Kumārasambhava*. One of the most moving and memorable depictions in world literature of both passion and penance, where the actors are the parents of the world, is found in this great poem. A God and a Goddess make love in an eternal embrace for the birth of a war prince who will release the world from the clutches of a demon and rejuvenate its whole existence.

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