

Further Observations On The Universal Influence Of Sanskrit Through Shakuntala

By Swami Tathagatananda

The marvelous universal destiny and impact of the Sanskrit language through the long ages is twofold. Its divine inspiration helps the individual to go beyond a finite concept of self and to develop a divine personality as well as the worldly one with which he or she has solely identified. Sanskrit accomplishes this through the medium of the Indian sacred and classical literature. The instruction India's literature conveys through Sanskrit is that of "the eternal, the universal and the spiritual in man," urging people to discover their spiritual consciousness. The *Upanishads* and other sacred Hindu texts introduced to the West through eminent Sanskritists and Indologists are the great conveyors of spiritual enlightenment to the world. Sanskrit is also uniquely suited to have an eternal and boundless relationship with the world due to its continuity in Indian tradition and culture.

In 1991, a scholarly work of great devotion was published by Dorothy Matilda Figueira that indicates the enduring and profound interest on the subject of *Shakuntala*. *Translating the Orient, The Reception of Sakuntala in Nineteenth-Century Europe* documents the author's painstaking comparative study of the major European translations of *Abhijnana Sakuntalam*. Her critical analysis of the text fulfills the objective of addressing the specific problems encountered in cross-cultural translation to serve the nobler purpose of greater understanding between all the cultures of the world. Taking into account that some pedantic Germans used *Shakuntala* to promote their agenda of national cultural ascendancy, Figueira affirms that the literary event of the discovery and translation of *Shakuntala* "opened up not only the boundaries of humanism, but also fostered a widespread reevaluation of national literatures . . . in the ability of all ethnic groups to produce great art."

As one of the most circulated Sanskrit translations, Kalidasa's *Abhijnana Sakuntalam* provides a radiant example of the continuous attraction for the immortal Sanskrit works in the modern West. Sir William Jones, the first to translate Kalidasa's masterpiece, had read about Hindu writings in letters of Jesuit missionaries, but lacked knowledge of Sanskrit. His intense search to unearth the "gold in Sanskrit," which brought him face-to-face with a Sanskrit pundit who informed him that Kalidasa's *Abhijnana Sakuntalam* was the most widely known Hindu drama, resulted in Jones' pioneering work. It was accepted as the "first complete text translated from the Sanskrit without a Persian intermediary." (Hemant Kanitkar places a Bengali version of the drama in Jones' hands for his translation.)

Jones actually completed his first translation of Kalidasa's drama in Latin, "which bears so great a resemblance to Sanskrit, that it is more convenient than any other modern language for a scrupulous interlineary version," but then rendered it "word for word" into English, "without suppressing any material sentence" and "disengaged it from the stiffness of a foreign idiom and prepared the faithful translation." It may be noted that Jones' first translation of the drama in Latin is not to be found today. Later, he translated it "word for word" into English, "without suppressing any material sentence" and "disengaged it from the stiffness of a foreign idiom and prepared the faithful translation."

We have seen that Jones' *Shakuntala* was reprinted five times in England between 1790 and 1807 and retranslated and published many times throughout Europe. Figueira sheds new light on the far-reaching influence in the West of Kalidasa's masterpiece. She found that in the nineteenth century, no less than forty-six translations in twelve different languages of *Shakuntala* were published in Europe.

Beyond the tribute of so many translations, Europeans embraced *Shakuntala* as their very own—her story was "adapted, parodied, sung and danced." The pure, noble and heroic essence of Indian culture in *Shakuntala* transcended every boundary of misconception, preconception and prejudice inherent in cross-culturally translated works. *Shakuntala* was translated more than ten times, adapted to the German theater and the Parisian ballet and produced on the English stage in 1899, 1912 and 1913. Figueira points out that the banal taste of theatergoers everywhere was elevated by productions of *Shakuntala*. With that purpose in his mind, Alexander Tairov deliberately staged the play at Moscow's Kamerny Theater in 1914. He adapted it to the aesthetics of the prevailing Symbolist School, which emphasized the visual, poetic and contemplative descriptions of nature. In 1858, Gautier offered the French their first glimpse of the drama in *Sacountala*, his distorted adaptation of the drama (deliberately limited to two acts and nine scenes to match the attention span of the audience) for the Parisian ballet. In 1895, André Ferdinand Hérold's adaptation, *L'Anneau de Sakuntala*, was performed and well received at the Théâtre de l'Oeuvre in Paris.

After George Forster sent Herder his own translation of *Shakuntala*, Herder wrote back to him that it "was a masterpiece that appears once every two thousand years." Herder proceeded to base his construction of the Indian origin of the human race on *Shakuntala*. His *Ideen zur Philosophie der Geschichte der Menschheit (Ideas on the Philosophy of History)* firmly established India's relationship to the rest of the world and gave the legitimate foundation to the philosophy of history. Herder's study of *Shakuntala* also convinced him that the Greek model was no longer the absolute model in art; he introduced *Shakuntala* as a new model in dramaturgy. His lengthy essay on the subject challenged the standard use of Aristotelian dramatic theory to evaluate dramatic works; it is included in *Zerstreute Blätter*, the fourth collection of his works.

Shakuntala uniquely led the many European operas that were set in India in the 18th and 19th century. It was the only Sanskrit text adapted to music, though few of the *Shakuntala* operas are left to posterity. Those composed by Schubert, Tomaschek, Hopffer, Flotow and Perfall are gone forever, as are others that were performed in Germany by Balduin Zimmermann (Erfurt, 1905), Ferdinand Hummel (Berlin, 1903),

and Antonin Modharelli (Augsburg, 1930). Although some of the operatic versions that remain descended into musical melodramas, including those of Felix Weingartner (Weimar, 1884) and L. P. Scharwenka (1885), they are evidence of the fascination and function of *Shakuntala* in the collective mind of the West. *Shakuntala* continues to fascinate. In 1962, M. B. Emeneau published a new translation in California. An adaptation of Franco Alfano's opera, *La Leggenda di Sakuntala*, originally performed in Italy in 1921, was presented at Ireland's Wexford Festival in 1982.

This broad appeal of *Shakuntala* demonstrates the universal revelation of Sanskrit in diversely creative minds that concentrate on extracting the essence of Hinduism from Sanskrit works. *Shakuntala* was the "ideal footbridge" over which Goethe and Herder crossed into India as well as the path of entry to the new field of Sanskrit studies in the 18th century.

We offer Figueira's poignant illustration of the profound and far-reaching capacity of Sanskrit scripture to inspire and transform. Theodor Springmann, a German officer during World War I, translated the *Bhagavad Gita* and carried the sacred scripture into the trenches with him. Only months before his death while performing his duty as a Commander of mine throwing, he wrote the Preface to his translation and gave a meaningful epigraph:

One can never find anything right in life without abstraction and metaphysical knowledge, thoroughness and piety. What is needed is an educated overview of the whole, the fervor of the faith and feeling, which inspires to action and which gives them real value; also needed is the self-discipline acquired through long effort, the ability to concentrate instantly all the powers on one single point. Thus, the various systems and ways of salvation are mobilized in the *Bhagavad Gita* to show the necessity to fight against the enemies of justice and to give moral strength to those fighting in this battle. The very brahmanic cult of sacrifice can teach us to look at the entire life as a sacrifice. The greatest sacrifice is the sacrifice of the warrior's life upon the altar of the battle. The gates of Heaven are open to him.

Theodor Springmann's opinion and feeling highlight the human potential for transcending the pessimistic thought that is typically grounded in actions of the will in the West, from which Western philosophers sought release in the inspired Sanskrit works of the East.

Endnotes

Dorothy Matilda Figueira, *Translating the Orient: The Reception of Sakuntala in Nineteenth-Century Europe* (Albany, 1991), 16. [Hereafter *Translating the Orient*]

Hemant Kanitkar in "Shakuntala's Progress West of Suez," his introduction to his translation, *Kalidas's Abhijnana Shakuntala* (Bombay, 1984). [Hereafter *Shakuntala*, Kanitkar trans.]

Translating the Orient, 9.

Shakuntala, Kanitkar trans.

Translating the Orient, 26.

Op. cit., 26.

Ibid., 26.

Oriental Renaissance, 51, 53.

Translating the Orient, 12.

Op. cit., 186-7.

Ibid., 183, 230.

Ibid., 185, 230.

Ibid., 13.

Herder, *Sämtliche Werke*, B. Suphan, ed. (Berlin, 1877-1913), 16:1-106, 29:131-146.
Cit. from *Translating the Orient*, 13, 14.

Sämtliche Werke, 16:85-129. Cit. from *Translating the Orient*, 14.

Translating the Orient, 189, 233

Op. cit., 189.

Shakuntala, Kanitkar trans.

Translating the Orient, 233.

Op. cit., 210-11, translation of German citation.