The Lyricism of Kalidasa and the Classical Sanskrit Drama

The World’s Classics lecture series
The topics about which I shall speak today...

• What is Classical Sanskrit literature?

• Who is Kalidasa? Why should we be interested in him?

• The lyric drama of Kalidasa, Recognition of Shakuntala

• What we can gain from studying Kalidasa’s works.
India and the Classics

Modern Indian Languages: 1652;  129 languages spoken by more than a million people

Official Indian Classical Languages: Sanskrit, Tamil, Telugu, Kannada
What makes a language classical?

a. “High antiquity of its early texts/recorded history over a period of 1500-2000 years;

b. A body of ancient literature/texts, which is considered a valuable heritage by generations of speakers;

c. The literary tradition it original and not borrowed from another speech community”
Two Distinct but Interrelated Classical Traditions

• 1. Dravidian South:
  Tamil,
  Kannada,
  Telugu
Indo-European North

• Sanskrit and its ancient sisters

• These will become Hindi, Gujarati, Bengali etc.
Why do we read the classical literature of India?

• It has shaped the culture of a major civilization of the world.

• It helps us to understand the mind-set of a major portion of the world’s population.

• It is full of excellent works that speak to all of us.
Classical India: AD 400-1000

• In itself an historical concept = India of the Gupta Emperors

• The area covered is huge.

• Many different cultures and languages.

• Sankrit provides a lingua franca among the educated.
The Physical Reality of India of the 1st Millennium of our Era
Classical India

• The literary legacy of Sanskrit Literature

• The Classical Language as standardized by Panini

• The literature produced in Classical Sanskrit includes works by Dravidian, Nepali and Sinhalese as well as Indian authors.
An Immense Literature

• Classical Greek literature represents a fraction of what we have of Classical Sanskrit Literature.

• Literature in Classical Sanskrit is still being produced.
“Classical Sanskrit” is a linguistic concept.

- How much of this literature is “classic”? 
- Developing a just aesthetic. 
- Evaluating “classical” by enhancing our ability to judge.
Why has it taken us so long?

• We’ve had access to many Sanskrit texts for 200 years.

• Classical Sanskrit Literature is NOT Classical Greek and Latin Literature.

• Some preconceived ideas
“I have no knowledge of either Sanskrit or Arabic. — But I have done what I could to form a correct estimate of their value. I have read translations of the most celebrated Arabic and Sanskrit works. I have conversed both here and at home with men distinguished by their proficiency in the Eastern tongues. I am quite ready to take the Oriental learning at the valuation of the Orientalists themselves. I have never found one among them who could deny that a single shelf of a good European library was worth the whole native literature of India and Arabia. . . ”
This opinion is still current among us.

- Sanskrit is not widely taught.

- Many standard references works reflect the colonialist attitude.
Looking today at one author...

- Even some 19th-century Europeans considered Kalidasa a classic...

- Accessible because he is simply a very great writer

- He works in a genre that overlaps some in the West.
Kalidasa wrote epic, lyric and dramatic poetry

- His themes are drawn from Indian Mythology.
He universalizes the subjects he treats.

He occupies the place where Western readers can enter the Sanskrit literary tradition.

We can read his works without requiring substantial background.

• We may therefore count him among our classics.
Who was Kalidasa?

- The problem with DATES in Indian literature.

- My position: Kalidasa lived at Ujjain at the court of Vikramaditya in the 5th cen of our era.

- A period of homogenizing and consolidating of the Sanskrit literary culture.
Kalidasa wrote kāvya.

• Kavi: a poet

• Kāvya is what a poet does

• Kāvya has many forms: it is itself a literary genre.
Sanskrit Literature’s genres

- Scripture
- Tradition/History
- Treatises (texts for instruction)
- Kāvya
Kāvya Literature

- Includes metrical poetry AND prose
- Can be written in any language...but is best in Sanskrit!
- The ultimate humanist genre
What Kāvya does....

Examining truth of human experience by examining human responses to the world

Human experiences examined as a variety of emotional responses

We learn by feeling; in our emotions lies profound truth.
What Kāvya does....2

- Human emotional responses categorized
- Love, humor, energy, anger, fear, grief, disgust, amazement
- A work of Kāvya focuses upon one emotion and subordinates several others
• ...to the audience: how does the reader respond to this poetry?

• Rāsa: “taste” ... We sip the emotions offered in the art, we savor them

• The audience does not identify with the characters as it does in the Western tradition.
Drama especially is where Indian Kāvya overlaps Western Poetry.

Sanskrit plays are among the first texts to be translated into European languages.

Influence upon Goethe: “Prelude in the Theater” in Faust
We know rather a lot about ancient Indian drama.

Bharata’s “Natya-shastra” = treatise on drama

But maybe TOO much for today’s lecture....
Kalidasa’s *Abhijñānashākuntalam*

- “The Recognition of Shakuntala”

- Schiller’s assessment: "In the whole world of Greek antiquity there is no poetical representation of beautiful love that approaches it even from a distance.”
The Mythic Plot

• A folktale embedded in the epic tradition

• Explains the parentage of Bharata, a great Indian epic hero
Dushanta is a perfectly noble king.

- His kingdom stretches from Pakistan to Bengal.
- Virtuous, pious and true-hearted.
- On a hunting expedition.
In the āshram of the muni Kanva
He meets Shakuntala,
She is the daughter of Menaka and Vishvamitra.
Like all drama drawn from ancient myths...

• One story leads to another...
Dushanta and Shakuntala fall in love and marry...

He must return quickly to protect his kingdom

He gives her a ring

He promises to send for her soon

He leaves her pregnant.
While thinking of her husband

- Shakuntala neglects to give welcoming attention to Durvasa.

- Durvasa’s curse.
Shakuntala goes to Dushanta’s court

- But he doesn’t recognize her
- She has lost the ring he gave her
- He refuses to accept her into his court.
Menaka spirits her pregnant daughter away to a secret fairyland.

• Meanwhile, Dushanta finds the ring and remembers.

• Lamentation, distress, but no Shakuntala for seven years.
One day Dushanta is asked by the gods to come to heaven to fight demons.

- On his way back to earth, his charioteer stops at the ashram of the super-sage Marica.

- He finds there his son and Shakuntala.

- Reconciliation and happily ever after.
Compared to the spare plots of Greek tragedy, this play is very long

- It has seven long acts.
- Probably one act was performed on each successive day.
- Action covers many years.
But Kalidasa is not trying to create the perfect symmetrical plot.

He is presenting distilled emotion through poetry.
Some examples of Kalidasa’s lyrical treatment of this myth.

• When Dushanta approaches the ashram of Kanva he is overwhelmed by the tranquility of the place:
  Grains of wild race fallen from tree-hollows where parrots nest, lie scattered under the trees;
  those stones there look moist, glossy, from the oil of ingudi-nuts split and pounded on them;
  all around, deer browse in their tranquil haunts, unafraid of the chariot’s approach; yonder,
  drops of water dripping off the edges of bark-garments in long lines, trace the paths to pools and streams.

[Chandra Rajan’s translation]
When Dushanta enters the ashram, the ascetics use a metaphor of a frightened elephant:

‘Crazed with fear at the sight of a chariot,
Scattering terror-stricken antelope-herds,
Holding aloft skewered on one trunk
A branch sliced off a tree by a violent blow
And in fury dragging along tangled chains
Of trailing wild creepers that form fetters round him, a tusker rampages in our Grove of Righteousness...the very embodiment of hindrance to penance.’
Kalidasa is a master of imagery

- Dushanta tries to describe Shakuntala:

  “Contemplating Brahma’s imaging power ineffable
  and her beauty, she flashes on my eye,
  a jewel among women
  Of another order of Creation, extraordinary;
  As if the Mighty Creator gathering rarest elements of beauty pictured perfection first,
  Then quickened it with the Breath of Life.”
Love-sick Shakuntala

• “With ushira-balm spread thick over her breasts
And a single bracelet of tender lotus stalks
That hangs pale and withered on her wrist..
How exquisite she looks in her pale loveliness:
Summer’s heat can strike as savage as love...
But to burn young girls into such splendor
I cannot think that lies in Summer’s power.”
Shakuntala rejected by Dushanta

“Her eyes red with anger look straight at me,
Her words flung out harsh, not smoothed into a drawl:
Her lower lip like a ripe bimba-fruit
Is all quivering as if struck by an icy blast;
Her eyebrows, graceful curves,
Knot together in a twisting frown.
When I cruelly denied our secret love
Then did she dart flaming glances on me,
Fiercely bending the graceful curve of her brow,
It seemed she snapped the bow of Love itself.”
Dushanta sees his little son for the first time

This boy strikes me as the tiny germ
Of might valor that waits
Like a fiery spark for kindling,
Before it bursts into a blazing fire.
With fingers close knit, palm slightly hollowed, the hand he stretches out in eager expectation
To hold the wished-for plaything, resembles
A single lotus bud, its petals tightly shut,
Just prized open by Dawn’s first flush of rose.
Why read Kalidasa?

• An entrée into an immense and very great literature.

• A new way of viewing human experience: by savoring and contemplating the truth within human emotions.