The Greatness of India and Its Culture

14. The Greatness of Indian Literature – 12

Kalidasa

15th August, 2008

Volume 6 **Issue 4**

Price : Rs. 15/-

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Kalidasa

"The classical age of the ancient literature, the best known and appraised of all, covers a period of some ten centuries and possibly more, and it is marked off from the earlier writings by a considerable difference, not so much in substance, as in the moulding and the colour of its thought, temperament and language. The divine childhood, the heroic youth, the bright and strong early manhood of the people and its culture are over and there is instead a long and opulent maturity and as its sequence an equally opulent and richly coloured decline. The decline is not to death, for it is followed by a certain rejuvenescence, a fresh start and repeated beginning, of which the medium is no longer Sanskrit but the derived languages, the daughters of the dialects raised into literary instruments and developing as the grand and ancient tongue loses its last forces and inspiring life. The difference in spirit and mould between the epics and the speech of Bhartrihari and Kalidasa is already enormous and may possibly be explained by the early centuries of Buddhism when Sanskrit ceased to be the sole literary tongue understood and spoken by all educated men and Pali came up as its successful rival and the means of expression for at least a great part of the current of the national thought and life. The language and movement of the epics have all the vigour, freedom, spontaneous force and appeal of a speech that leaps straight from the founts of life; the speech of Kalidasa is an accomplished art, an intellectual and aesthetic creation consummate, deliberate, finely ornate, carved like a statue, coloured like a painting, not yet artificial, though there is a masterly artifice and device, but still a careful work of art

laboured by the intelligence. It is carefully natural, not with the spontaneous ease of a first, but the accomplished air of ease of a habitual second nature. The elements of artifice and device increase and predominate in the later writers, their language is a laborious and deliberate though a powerful and beautiful construction and appeals only to an erudite audience, a learned elite. The religious writings, Purana and Tantra, moving from a deeper, still intensely living source, aiming by their simplicity at a wider appeal, prolong for a time the tradition of the epics, but the simplicity and directness is willed rather than the earlier natural ease. In the end Sanskrit becomes the language of the Pundits and except for certain philosophical, religious and learned purposes no longer a first-hand expression of the life and mind of the people.

The alteration in the literary speech corresponds however, apart from all inducing circumstances, to a great change in the centre of mentality of the culture. It is still and always spiritual, philosophical, religious, ethical, but the inner austerer things seem to draw back a little and to stand in the background, acknowledged indeed and overshadowing the rest, but nevertheless a little detaching themselves from them and allowing them to act for their own enlargement and profit. The exterior powers that stand out in front are the curious intellect, the vital urge, the aesthetic, urbanely active and hedonistic sense life. It is the great period of logical philosophy, of science, of art and the developed crafts, law, politics, trade, colonisation, the great kingdoms and empires with their ordered and elaborate administrations, the minute rule of the Shastras in all departments of thought and life, an enjoyment of all that is brilliant, sensuous, agreeable, a discussion of all that could be thought and known, a fixing

and systemising of all that could be brought into the compass of intelligence and practice, – the most splendid, sumptuous and imposing millennium of Indian culture.

The intellectuality that predominates is not in any way restless, sceptical or negative, but it is enormously inquiring and active, accepting the great lines of spiritual, religious, philosophical and social truth that had been discovered and laid down by the past, but eager too to develop, to complete, to know minutely and thoroughly and fix in perfectly established system and detail, to work out all possible branches and ramifications, to fill the intelligence, the sense and the life. The grand basic principles and lines of Indian religion, philosophy, society have already been found and built and the steps of the culture move now in the magnitude and satisfying security of a great tradition; but there is still ample room for creation and discovery within these fields and a much wider province, great beginnings, strong developments of science and art and literature, the freedom of the purely intellectual and aesthetic activities, much scope too for the hedonisms of the vital and the refinements of the emotional being, a cultivation of the art and rhythmic practice of life. There is a highly intellectualised vital stress and a many-sided interest in living, an indulgence of an at once intellectual and vital and sensuous satisfaction extending even to a frankness of physical and sensual experience, but in the manner of the oriental mind with a certain decorousness and order, an element of aesthetic restraint and the observance of rule and measure even in indulgence that saves always from the unbridled licence to which less disciplined races are liable. The characteristic, the central action is the play of the intellectual mind and everywhere that predominates. In the

earlier age the many strands of the Indian mind and life principle are unified and inseparable, a single wide movement set to a strong and abundant but simple music; here they seem to stand side by side related and harmonised, curious and complex, multiply one. The spontaneous unity of the intuitive mind is replaced by the artificial unity of the analysing and synthetising intelligence. Art and religion still continue the predominance of the spiritual and intuitive motive, but it is less to the front in literature. A division has been settled between religious and secular writing that did not exist to any appreciable extent in the previous ages. The great poets and writers are secular creators and their works have no chance of forming part of the intimate religious and ethical mind of the people as did the Ramayana and Mahabharata. The stream of religious poetry flows separately in Purana and Tantra.

The great representative poet of this age is Kalidasa. He establishes a type which was preparing before and endured after him with more or less of additional decoration, but substantially unchanged through the centuries. His poems are the perfect and harmoniously designed model of a kind and substance that others cast always into similar forms but with a genius inferior in power or less rhythmically balanced, faultless and whole. The art of poetic speech in Kalidasa's period reaches an extraordinary perfection. Poetry itself had become a high craft, conscious of its means, meticulously conscientious in the use of its instruments, as alert and exact in its technique as architecture, painting and sculpture, vigilant to equate beauty and power of the form with nobility and richness of the conception, aim and spirit and the scrupulous completeness of its execution with fullness of aesthetic vision or of the emotional or sensuous appeal. There was established

here as in the other arts and indeed during all this era in all human activities a Shastra, a well recognised and carefully practised science and art of poetics, critical and formulative of all that makes perfection of method and prescriptive of things to be avoided, curious of essentials and possibilities but under a regime of standards and limits conceived with the aim of excluding all fault of excess or of defect and therefore in practice as unfavourable to any creative lawlessness, even though the poet's native right of fantasy and freedom is theoretically admitted, as to any least tendency towards bad or careless, hasty or irregular workmanship. The poet is expected to be thoroughly conscious of his art, as minutely acquainted with its conditions and its fixed and certain standard and method as the painter and sculptor and to govern by his critical sense and knowledge the flight of his genius. This careful art of poetry became in the end too much of a rigid tradition, too appreciative of rhetorical device and artifice and even permitted and admired the most extraordinary contortions of the learned intelligence, as in the Alexandrian decline of Greek poetry, but the earlier work is usually free from these shortcomings or they are only occasional and rare."[1]

1. The Malavas

"Once in the long history of poetry the great powers who are ever working the finest energies of nature into the warp of our human evolution, met together and resolved to unite in creating a poetical intellect & imagination that, endowed with the most noble & various poetical gifts, capable in all the great forms used by creative genius, should express once & for all in a supreme manner the whole sensuous plane of our life, its heat & light, its joy, colour & sweetness. And since to all quality there must be a corresponding defect, they not only gifted this genius with rich powers and a remarkable temperament but drew round it the necessary line of limitations. They then sought for a suitable age, nation and environment which should most harmonise with, foster and lend itself to his peculiar powers. This they found in the splendid & luxurious city of Ujjaini, the capital of the great nation of the Malavas, who consolidated themselves under Vikramaditya in the first century before Christ. Here they set the outcome of their endeavour & called him Kalidasa. The country of Avunti had always played a considerable part in our ancient history for which the genius, taste and high courage of its inhabitants fitted it & Ujjaini their future capital was always a famous, beautiful & wealthy city; but until the rise of Vikrama it seems to have been disunited and therefore unable to work out fully the great destiny for which the taste, genius [ ] marked it out. Moreover the temperament of the nation had not fitted it to be the centre of Aryan civilisation in the old times when that civilisation was preponderatingly moral and intellectual. Profoundly artistic and susceptible to material beauty and the glory of the senses, they had neither the large,

mild and pure temperament, spiritual & emotional, of the eastern nations which produced Janaca, Valmekie & Buddha, nor the bold intellectual temperament, heroic, ardent and severe, of the Central nations which produced Draupadie, Bhema, Urjouna, Bhishma, Vyasa and Srikrishna; neither were they quite akin to the searchingly logical, philosophic & scholastic temperament of the half Dravidian southern nations which produced the great grammarians and commentators and the mightiest of the purely logical philosophers, Madhva, Ramanuja, Shankaracharya. **The* Malavas were Westerners and the Western nations of India have always been material, practical & sensuous.** For the different races of this country have preserved their basic temperaments with a marvellous conservative power; modified & recombined they have been in no case radically altered. **Bengal colonised from the west by the Chedies & Haihayas & from the north by Coshalas & Magadhans, contains at present the most gentle, sensitive and emotional of the Indian races, also the most anarchic, self-willed, averse to control and in all things extreme; there is not much difference between the characters of Shishupal and that thoroughly Bengali king & great captain, Pratapaditya; the other side shows itself especially in the women who are certainly the tenderest, purest & most gracious & loving in the whole world.** Bengal has accordingly a literature far surpassing any other in an Indian tongue for emotional and lyrical power, loveliness of style & form and individual energy & initiative. The North West, inheritor of the Kurus, has on the other hand produced

* The **Stress** sha been introduced by the editor and is not there in the original.

the finest modern Vedantic poetry full of intellectual loftiness, insight and profundity, the poetry of Suradasa & Tulsi; its people are still the most sincerely orthodox and the most attached to the old type of thought & character, while the Rajputs, who are only a Central Nation which has drifted westward, preserved longest the heroic & chivalrous tradition of the Bharatas. **The Dravidians of the South, though they no longer show that magnificent culture and originality which made them the preservers & renovators of the higher Hindu thought & religion in its worst days, are yet, as we all know, far more genuinely learned & philosophic in their cast of thought & character than any other Indian race.** Similarly the West also preserves its tradition; the Punjab is typified by its wide acceptance of such crude, but practical & active religions as those of Nanak & Dayanunda Saraswati, religions which have been unable to take healthy root beyond the frontier of the five rivers; **Gujarat & Sindh show the same practical temper by their success in trade & commerce, but the former has preserved more of the old Western materialism & sensuousness than its neighbours. Finally the Mahrattas, perhaps the strongest and sanest race in India today, present a very peculiar & interesting type; they are southwestern & blend two very different characters; fundamentally a material and practical race – they are for instance extremely deficient in the romantic & poetical side of the human temperament – a race of soldiers & politicians, they have yet caught from the Dravidians a deep scholastic & philosophical tinge which along with a basic earnestness & capacity for high things has kept them true to Hinduism, gives a certain distinction to their**

otherwise matter-of-fact nature and promises much for their future development.

But the Malavas were a far greater, more versatile and culturable race than any which now represent the West; they had an aesthetic catholicity, a many sided curiosity and receptiveness which enabled them to appreciate learning, high moral ideals and intellectual daring & ardour and assimilate them as far as was consistent with their own root-temperament. Nevertheless that root-temperament remained material and sensuous. When therefore the country falling from its old pure moral ideality and heroic intellectualism, weakened in fibre & sunk towards hedonism & materialism, the centre of its culture & national life began to drift westward. Transferred by Agnimitra in the second century to Videsha of the Dasharnas close to the Malavas, it finally found its true equilibrium in the beautiful and aesthetic city of Ujjaini which the artistic & sensuous genius of the Malavas had prepared to be a fit & noble capital of Hindu art, poetry and greatness throughout its most versatile & luxurious age. That position Ujjaini enjoyed until the nation began to crumble under the shock of new ideas & new forces and the centre of gravity shifted southwards to Devagirrie of the Jadhavas and finally to Dravidian Vijayanagara, the last considerable seat of independent Hindu culture & national greatness. The consolidation of the Malavas under Vikramaditya[1] took place

[1]The majority of European scholars identify this Vikrama with Harsha of Ujjaini, the Grand Monarque of classical India; indigenous scholarship mostly dissents from this view, and an imaginative mind may well prefer to associate our greatest classical poet with the earlier and more heroic, if also more shadowy, Vikram, who united the Malavas and founded the power of

in 56 BC, and from that moment dates the age of Malava preeminence, the great era of the Malavas afterwards called the Samvat era. It was doubtless subsequent to this date that Kalidasa came to Ujjaini to sum up in his poetry, the beauty of human life, the splendours of art & the glory of the senses."[2]

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that great nation, the most gifted and artistic of the earlier Hindu peoples. There are no sufficient data to fix Kalidasa's epoch; he was certainly not later than the 6th century after Christ, certainly not earlier than the 1st century before; but a chronological margin of seven hundred years is too wide to encourage dogmatism.

2. The Age of Kalidasa

"Valmiki, Vyasa and Kalidasa are the essence of the history of ancient India; if all else were lost, they would still be its sole and sufficient cultural history. Their poems are types and exponents of three periods in the development of the human soul, types and exponents also of the three great powers which dispute and clash in the imperfect and half-formed temperament and harmonise in the formed and perfect. At the same time their works are pictures at once minute and grandiose of three moods of our Aryan civilisation, of which the first was predominatingly moral, the second predominatingly intellectual, the third predominatingly material. The fourth power of the soul, the spiritual, which can alone govern and harmonise the others by fusion with them, had not, though it pervaded and powerfully influenced each successive development, any separate age of predominance, did not like the others possess the whole race with a dominating obsession. It is because, conjoining in themselves the highest and most varied poetical gifts, they at the same time represent and mirror their age and humanity by their interpretative largeness and power that our three chief poets hold their supreme place and bear comparison with the greatest world-names, with Homer, Shakespeare and Dante.

It has been said, truly, that the Ramayana represents an ideal society and assumed, illogically, that it must therefore represent an altogether imaginary one. The argument ignores the alternative of a real society idealised. No poet could evolve entirely out of his own imagination a picture at once so

colossal, so minute and so consistent in every detail. No number of poets could do it without stumbling into fatal incompatibilities either of fact or of view, such as we find defacing the Mahabharata. This is not the place to discuss the question of Valmiki's age and authorship. This much, however, may be said that after excluding the Uttarakanda, which is a later work, and some amount of interpolation, for the most part easy enough to detect, and reforming the text which is not unfrequently in a state of truly shocking confusion, the Ramayana remains on the face of it the work of a single mighty and embracing mind. It is not easy to say whether it preceded or followed in date Vyasa's epic; it is riper in form and tone, has some aspects of a more advanced and mellow culture, and yet it gives the general impression of a younger humanity and an earlier less sophisticated and complex mind. The nature of the poem and much of its subject matter might at least justify the conclusion that Valmiki wrote in a political and social atmosphere much resembling that which surrounded Vyasa. He lived, that is to say, in an age of approaching if not present disorder and turmoil, of great revolutions and unbridled aristocratic violence, when the governing chivalry, the Kshatriya caste, in its pride of strength was asserting its own code of morals as the one rule of conduct. We may note the plain assertion of this stand-point by Jarasandha in the Mahabharata and Valmiki's emphatic and repeated protest against it through the mouth of Rama. This ethical code was like all aristocratic codes of conduct full of high chivalry and the spirit of *noblesse oblige*, but a little loose in sexual morality on the masculine side and indulgent to violence and the strong hand. To the pure and delicate moral temperament of Valmiki, imaginative, sensitive, enthusiastic, shot through with rays of

visionary idealism and ethereal light, this looseness and violence were shocking and abhorrent. He could sympathise with them, as he sympathised with all that was wild and evil and anarchic, with the imaginative and poetical side of his nature, because he was a universal creative mind driven by his art-sense to penetrate, feel and re-embody all that the world contained; but to his intellect and peculiar emotional temperament they were distasteful. He took refuge therefore in a past age of national greatness and virtue, distant enough to be idealised, but near enough to have left sufficient materials for a great picture of civilisation which would serve his purpose, – an age, it is important to note, of grandiose imperial equipoise, such as must have existed in some form at least since a persistent tradition of it runs through Sanskrit literature. In the framework of this imperial age, his puissant imagination created a marvellous picture of the human world as it might be if the actual and existing forms and material of society were used to the best and purest advantage, and an equally marvellous picture of another non-human world in which aristocratic violence, strength, self-will, lust and pride ruled supreme and idealised or rather colossalised. He brought these two worlds into warlike collision by the hostile meeting of their champions and utmost evolutions of their peculiar character-types, Rama and Ravana, and so created the Ramayana, the grandest and most paradoxical poem in the world, which becomes unmatchably sublime by disdaining all consistent pursuit of sublimity, supremely artistic by putting aside all the conventional limitations of art, magnificently dramatic by disregarding all dramatic illusion, and uniquely epic by handling the least as well as the most epic material. Not all perhaps can enter at once into the spirit of this

masterpiece; but those who have once done so, will never admit any poem in the world as its superior.

My point here, however, is that it gives us the picture of an entirely moralised civilisation, containing indeed vast material development and immense intellectual power, but both moralised and subordinated to the needs of purity of temperament and delicate ideality of action. Valmiki's mind seems nowhere to be familiarised with the high-strung intellectual gospel of a high and severe Dharma culminating in a passionless activity, raised to a supreme spiritual significance in the Gita, which is one great keynote of the Mahabharata. Had he known it, the strong leaven of sentimentalism and femininity in his nature might well have rejected it; such temperaments when they admire strength, admire it manifested and forceful rather than self-contained. Valmiki's characters act from emotional or imaginative enthusiasm, not from intellectual conviction; an enthusiasm of morality actuates Rama, an enthusiasm of immorality tyrannises over Ravana. Like all mainly moral temperaments, he instinctively insisted on one old established code of morals being universally observed as the only basis of ethical stability, avoided casuistic developments and distasted innovators in metaphysical thought as by their persistent and searching questions dangerous to the established bases of morality, especially to its wholesome ordinariness and everydayness. Valmiki, therefore, the father of our secular poetry, stands for that early and finely moral civilisation which was the true heroic age of the Hindu spirit.

The poet of the Mahabharata lives nearer to the centre of an era of aristocratic turbulence and disorder. If there is any kernel of historic truth in the story of the poem, it records

the establishment of those imperial forms of government and society which Valmiki had idealised. Behind its poetic legend it celebrates and approves the policy of a great Kshatriya leader of men who aimed at the subjection of his order to the rule of a central imperial power which should typify its best tendencies and control or expel its worst. But while Valmiki was a soul out of harmony with its surroundings and looking back to an ideal past, Vyasa was a man of his time, profoundly in sympathy with it, full of its tendencies, hopeful of its results and looking forward to an ideal future. The one might be described as a conservative idealist advocating return to a better but departed model, the other is a progressive realist looking forward to a better but unborn model. Vyasa accordingly does not revolt from the aristocratic code of morality; it harmonises with his own proud and strong spirit and he accepts it as a basis for conduct, but purified and transfigured by the illuminating idea of the *niṣkāma dharma*.

But above all intellectuality is his grand note, he is profoundly interested in ideas, in metaphysics, in ethical problems; he subjects morality to casuistic tests from which the more delicate moral tone of Valmiki's spirit shrank; he boldly erects above ordinary ethics a higher principle of conduct having its springs in intellect and strong character; he treats government and society from the standpoint of a practical and discerning statesmanlike mind, idealising solely for the sake of a standard. He touches in fact all subjects, and whatever he touches he makes fruitful and interesting by originality, penetration and a sane and bold vision. In all this he is the son of the civilisation he has mirrored to us, a civilisation in which both morality and material development are powerfully intellectualised. Nothing is more remarkable

in all the characters of the Mahabharata than this puissant intellectualism; every action of theirs seems to be impelled by an immense driving force of mind solidifying in character and therefore conceived and outlined as in stone. This orgiastic force of the intellect is at least as noticeable as the impulse of moral or immoral enthusiasm behind each great action of the Ramayana. Throughout the poem the victorious and manifold mental activity of an age is prominent and gives its character to its civilisation. There is far more of thought in action than in the Ramayana, far less of thought in repose; the one pictures a time of gigantic creative ferment and disturbance; the other, as far as humanity is concerned, an ideal age of equipoise, tranquillity and order.

Many centuries after these poets, perhaps a thousand years or even more, came the third great embodiment of the national consciousness, Kalidasa. There is a far greater difference between the civilisation he mirrors than between Vyasa's and Valmiki's. He came when the daemonic orgy of character and intellect had worked itself out and ended in producing at once its culmination and reaction in Buddhism. There was everywhere noticeable a petrifying of the national temperament, visible to us in the tendency to codification; philosophy was being codified, morals were being codified, knowledge of any and every sort was being codified; it was on one side of its nature an age of scholars, legists, dialecticians, philosophical formalisers. On the other side the creative and aesthetic enthusiasm of the nation was pouring itself into things material, into the life of the senses, into the pride of life and beauty. The arts of painting, architecture, song, dance, drama, gardening, jewellery, all that can administer to the wants of great and luxurious capitals, received a grand

impetus which brought them to their highest technical perfection. **That this impetus came from Greek sources or from the Buddhists seems hardly borne out: the latter may rather have shared in the general tendencies of the time than originated them, and the Greek theory gives us a maximum of conclusions with a minimum of facts.** I do not think, indeed, it can be maintained that this period, call it classical or material or what one will, was marked off from its predecessor by any clear division: such a partition would be contrary to the law of human development. Almost all the concrete features of the age may be found as separate facts in ancient India: codes existed from old time; art and drama were of fairly ancient origin, to whatever date we may assign their development; physical yoga processes existed almost from the first, and the material development portrayed in the Ramayana and Mahabharata is hardly less splendid than that of which the Raghuvamsa is so brilliant a picture. But whereas, before, these were subordinated to more lofty ideals, now they prevailed and became supreme, occupying the best energies of the race and stamping themselves on its life and consciousness. In obedience to this impulse the centuries between the rise of Buddhism and the advent of Shankaracharya became, though not agnostic and sceptical, for they rejected violently the doctrines of Charvak, yet profoundly scientific and outward-going even in their spiritualism. It was therefore the great age of formalised metaphysics, science, law, art and the sensuous luxury which accompanies the arts.

Nearer the beginning than the end of this period, when India was systematising her philosophies and developing her arts and sciences, turning from Upanishad to Purana, from

the high rarefied peaks of early Vedanta and Sankhya with their inspiring sublimities and bracing keenness to physical methods of ascetic yoga and the dry intellectualism of metaphysical logic or else to the warm sensuous humanism of emotional religion, – before its full tendencies had asserted themselves, in some spheres before it had taken the steps its attitude portended, Kalidasa arose in Ujjayini and gathered up in himself its present tendencies while he foreshadowed many of its future developments. He himself must have been a man gifted with all the learning of his age, rich, aristocratic, moving wholly in high society, familiar with and fond of life in the most luxurious metropolis of his time, passionately attached to the arts, acquainted with the sciences, deep in law and learning, versed in the formalised philosophies. He has some notable resemblances to Shakespeare; among others his business was, like Shakespeare's, to sum up the immediate past in the terms of the present: at the same time he occasionally informed the present with hints of the future. Like Shakespeare also he seems not to have cared deeply for religion. In creed he was a Vedantist and in ceremony perhaps a Sivaworshipper, but he seems rather to have accepted these as the orthodox forms of his time and country, recommended to him by his intellectual preference and aesthetic affinities, than to have satisfied with them any profound religious want. In morals also he accepted and glorified the set and scientifically elaborate ethics of the codes, but seems himself to have been destitute of the .ner elements of morality. We need not accept any of the ribald and witty legends with which the Hindu decadence surrounded his name; but no unbiassed student of Kalidasa's poetry can claim for him eithermoral fervour or moral strictness. His writings show indeed a keen

appreciation of high ideal and lofty thought, but the appreciation is aesthetic in its nature: he elaborates and seeks to bring out the effectiveness of these on the imaginative sense of the noble and grandiose, applying to the things of the mind and soul the same aesthetic standard as to the things of sense themselves. He has also the natural high aristocratic feeling for all that is proud and great and vigorous, and so far as he has it, he has exaltation and sublimity; but aesthetic grace and beauty and symmetry sphere in the sublime and prevent it from standing out with the bareness and boldness which is the sublime's natural presentation. His poetry has, therefore, never been, like the poetry of Valmiki and Vyasa, a great dynamic force for moulding heroic character or noble or profound temperament. In all this he represented the highly vital and material civilisation to which he belonged.

Yet some dynamic force a poet must have, some general human inspiration of which he is the supreme exponent; or else he cannot rank with the highest. Kalidasa is the great, the supreme poet of the senses, of aesthetic beauty, of sensuous emotion. **His main achievement is to have taken every poetic element, all great poetical forms, and subdued them to a harmony of artistic perfection set in the key of sensuous beauty. In continuous gift of seizing an object and creating it to the eye he has no rival in literature. A strong visualising faculty such as the greatest poets have in their most inspired descriptive moments, was with Kalidasa an abiding and unfailing power, and the concrete presentation which this definiteness of vision demanded, suffused with an intimate and sovereign feeling for beauty of colour and beauty of form, constitutes the characteristic Kalidasian manner. He is besides a**

consummate artist, profound in conception and suave in execution, a master of sound and language who has moulded for himself out of the infinite possibilities of the Sanskrit tongue a verse and diction which are absolutely the grandest, most puissant and most full-voiced of any human speech, a language of the Gods. The note struck by Kalidasa when he built Sanskrit into that palace of noble sound, is the note which meets us in almost all the best work of the classic literature. Its characteristic features of style are a compact but never abrupt brevity, a soft gravity and smooth majesty, a noble harmony of verse, a strong and lucid beauty of chiselled prose, above all an epic precision of phrase, weighty, sparing and yet full of colour and sweetness. Moreover it is admirably flexible, suiting itself to all forms from the epic to the lyric, but most triumphantly to the two greatest, the epic and the drama. In his epic style Kalidasa adds to these permanent features a more than Miltonic fullness and grandiose pitch of sound and expression, in his dramatic an extraordinary grace and suavity which makes it adaptable to conversation and the expression of dramatic shade and subtly blended emotion.

With these supreme gifts Kalidasa had the advantage of being born into an age with which he was in temperamental sympathy and a civilisation which lent itself naturally to his peculiar descriptive genius. **It was an aristocratic civilisation, as indeed were those which had preceded it, but it far more nearly resembled the aristocratic civilisations of Europe by its material luxury, its aesthetic tastes, its polite culture, its keen worldly wisdom and its excessive appreciation of wit and learning. Religious and ethical thought and sentiment were cultivated much as**

in France under Louis XIV, more in piety and profession than as swaying the conduct; they pleased the intellect or else touched the sentiment, but did not govern the soul. It was bad taste to be irreligious, but it was not bad taste to be sensual or even in some respects immoral. The splendid and luxurious courts of this period supported the orthodox religion and morals out of convention, conservatism, the feeling for established order and the inherited tastes and prejudices of centuries, not because they fostered any deep religious or ethical sentiment. Yet they applauded high moral ideas if presented to them in cultured and sensuous poetry much in the same spirit that they applauded voluptuous description similarly presented. The ideals of morality were much lower than of old; free drinking was openly recognised and indulged in by both sexes; purity of life was less valued than in any other period of our civilisation. Yet the unconquerable monogamous instinct of the high-class Hindu woman seems to have prevented promiscuous vice and the disorganisation of the home which was the result of a similar state of society in ancient Rome, in Italy of the Renascence, in France under the Bourbons and in England under the later Stuarts. The old spiritual tendencies were also rather latent than dead, the mighty pristine ideals still existed in theory, – they are outlined with extraordinary grandeur by Kalidasa, – nor had they yet been weakened or lowered to a less heroic key. It was a time in which one might expect to meet the extremes of indulgence side by side with the extremes of renunciation; for the inherent spirituality of the Hindu nature finally revolted against the splendid and unsatisfying life of the senses. But of this phase Bhartrihari and not Kalidasa is the poet. The greater writer lived evidently

in the full heyday of the material age, and there is no sign of any setting in of the sickness and dissatisfaction and disillusionment which invariably follow a long outburst of materialism.

The flourishing of the plastic arts had prepared surroundings of great external beauty of the kind needed for Kalidasa's poetic work. The appreciation of beauty in nature, of the grandeur of mountain and forest, the loveliness of lakes and rivers, the charm of bird and beast life had become a part of contemporary culture. These and the sensitive appreciation of trees and plants and hills as living things, the sentimental feeling of brotherhood with animals which had influenced and been encouraged by Buddhism, the romantic mythological world still farther romanticised by Kalidasa's warm humanism and fine poetic sensibility, gave him exquisite grace and grandeur of background and scenic variety. The delight of the eye, the delight of the ear, smell, palate, touch, the satisfaction of the imagination and taste are the texture of his poetical creation, and into this he has worked the most beautiful flowers of emotion and intellectual or aesthetic ideality. The scenery of his work is a universal paradise of beautiful things. All therein obeys one law of earthly grace; morality is aestheticised, intellect suffused and governed with the sense of beauty. And yet this poetry does not swim in languor, does not dissolve itself in sensuous weakness; it is not heavy with its own dissoluteness, heavy of curl and heavy of eyelid, cloyed by its own sweets, as the poetry of the senses usually is. Kalidasa is saved from this by the chastity of his style, his aim at burdened precision and energy of phrase, his unsleeping artistic vigilance.

As in the Ramayana and Mahabharata we have an

absorbing intellect impulse or a dynamic force of moral or immoral excitement driving the characters, so we have in Kalidasa an intense hedonistic impulse thrilling through speech and informing action. An imaginative pleasure in all shades of thought and of sentiment, a rich delight of the mind in its emotions, a luxuriousness of ecstasy and grief, a free abandonment to amorous impulse and rapture, a continual joy of life and seeking for beauty mark the period when **India, having for the time exhausted the possibilities of soul-experience attainable through the spirit and the imaginative reason, was now attempting to find out the utmost each sense could feel, probing and sounding the soul-possibilities in matter and even seeking God through the senses.** The emotional religion of the Vaishnava Puranas which takes as its type of the relation between the human soul and the Supreme the passion of a woman for her lover, was already developing. The corresponding Tantric development of Shaivism may not yet have established itself fully; but the concretisation of the idea of Purusha-Prakriti, the union of Ishwara and Shakti, from which it arose, was already there in the symbolic legends of the Puranas and one of these is the subject of Kalidasa's greatest epic poem. The Birth of the War-God stands on the same height in classical Sanskrit as the Paradise Lost in English literature: it is the masterpiece and *magnum opus* of the age on the epic level. The central idea of this great unfinished poem, the marriage of Siva and Parvati, typified in its original idea the union of Purusha and Prakriti, the supreme Soul and dynamic Nature by which the world is created; but this type of divine legend was used esoterically to typify also the Nature-Soul's search for and attainment of God, and

something of this conception pierces through the description of Parvati's seeking after Siva. Such was the age of Kalidasa, the temper of the civilisation which produced him; other poets of the time expressed one side of it or another, but his work is its splendid integral epitome, its picture of many composite hues and tones. **Of the temperament of that civilisation the Seasons is an immature poetic self-expression, the House of Raghu the representative epic, the Cloud Messenger the descriptive elegy, Shakuntala with its two sister loveplays intimate dramatic pictures and the Birth of the War-God the grand religious fable. Kalidasa, who expressed so many sides and facets of it in his writings, stands for its representative man and genius, as was Vyasa of the intellectual mood of Indian civilisation and Valmiki of its moral side.**

It was the supreme misfortune of India that before she was able to complete the round of her experience and gather up the fruit of her long millenniums of search and travail by commencing a fourth and more perfect age in which moral, intellectual and material development should be all equally harmonised and all spiritualised, the inrush of barbarians broke in finally on her endless solitary tapasya of effort and beat her national life into fragments. A preparation for such an age may be glimpsed in the new tendencies of spiritual seeking that began with Shankara and continued in later Vaishnavism and Shaivism and in new turns of poetry and art, but it found no opportunity of seizing on the total life of the nation and throwing it into another mould. The work was interrupted before it had well begun; and India was left with only the remnants of the culture of the material age to piece out her existence. **Yet even the little that was done**

afterwards, proved to be much; for it saved her from gradually petrifying and perishing as almost all the old civilisations, Assyria, Egypt, Greece, Rome, petrified and perished, as the material civilisation of Europe, unless spiritualised, must before long petrify and perish[2]. That there is still an unexhausted vitality in her, that she yet nourishes the seeds of re-birth and renewal, we owe to Shankara and his successors and the great minds and souls that came after them. Will she yet arise, new combine her past and continue the great dream where she left it off, shaking off on the one hand the soils and filth that have grown on her in her period of downfall and futile struggle, **and re-asserting on the other her peculiar individuality and national type against the callow civilisation of the West with its dogmatic and intolerant knowledge, its still more dogmatic and intolerant ignorance, its deification of selfishness and force, its violence and its ungoverned Titanism? In doing so lies her one chance of salvation."[3]**

[2]Please see Appendix I for a note on the problem of poetical translation and the critical importance of translating the great secular and religious poetry of the past in modern languages.

3. Kalidasa and the Spirit of the Times

"The life & personality[3] of Kalidasa, the epoch in which he lived and wrote, the development of his poetical genius as evidenced by the order of his works, are all lost in a thick cloud of uncertainty and oblivion. It was once thought an established fact that he lived & wrote in the 6th century at the court of Harsha Vikramaditya, the Conqueror of the Scythians. That position is now much assailed, and some would place him in the third or fourth century; others see ground to follow popular tradition in making him a contemporary of Virgil, if not of Lucretius.

The exact date matters little. It is enough that we find in Kalidasa's poetry the richest bloom and perfect expression of the long classical afternoon of Indian civilisation. The soul of an age is mirrored in this single mind. It was an age when the Indian world after seeking God through the spirit and through action turned to seek Him through the activity of the senses, an age therefore of infinite life, colour and splendour, an age of brilliant painting and architecture, wide learning, complex culture, developing sciences; an age of great empires and luxurious courts and cities; an age, above all, in which the physical beauty and grace of woman dominated the minds and imaginations of men.

The spirit of the times pulses through all Kalidasa's poetry. His pages are often ablaze with its light & colour, often pregnant, sometimes indeed overweighted with its rich

[3]Please see Appendix II for a note on the use of the Historical Method in the evaluation of great poets.

and manifold learning, its keen pleasure in every phase and aspect of life fills them with a various vividness and infinite richness of matter. Language & verse thrill with the rustling of woman's raiment, the heavy scent of her cosmetics, the tinkling and lustre of her ornaments; they are sinuous with the swaying grace of her motion or subtle with the delicate charm of her ways and words; the beauty & pleasure of her body possesses & besieges the poet's imagination. And behind the luxurious ease and sensuousness of court life we hear the clash of arms and glimpse the great & energetic motions of statesmanship and diplomacy. The variety of his genius specially fits Kalidasa for the interpretation of a rich & complex national life. From pages heavy with the obsession of the senses, the delight of the eye and the lust of the fiesh we turn to others sweet and gracious with the virgin purity of the woodlands; the same poem which gives us a glowing picture of the luxurious voluptuousness of courts gives us also the sternest philosophy and the most vigorous expression of the noble, aspiring morality proper to an active and heroic age. His wonderful visualising power turns whole cantos into a series of almost physically vivid pictures. **All his senses are on the alert, his ear for music and the sweetness of words and laughter, thunder, the cries of birds; his sense of smell for the scent of flowers, incense, the perfumes in women's attire, his sense of touch for every tactual pleasure, his mind for all subtlety of knowledge and all possible delicacies, richnesses, grandeurs in the world of thought. He will miss nothing; lose no joy of sense or intellect, throw away no chance of feeling himself alive.**

And he has the touch of the perfect artist, turning all he handles to gold. Among his achievements we number the most

exquisite, tender and delicately lovely of romantic dramas; the most varied and splendid panorama of human life; the noblest & most grandiose epic of our classical literature; and its one matchless poem of passionate love and descriptive beauty.

In Europe the Shacountala is the one poem of Kalidasa universally known and appreciated. In India the Cloud has gone even nearer home to the national imagination. For this there is good reason. It is, essentially and above all, the poem of India, the poem of the country, its soil and its scenes, its thoughts & its atmosphere. No one who has not lived the life of India, till it has become part of his breathing and woven in with every thread of his imagination, can fully appreciate the poem. If one does not know the charm of its hills, the scent of its flowers, the beauty of its skies, [the] flowing sacredness of its rivers with all the phases & emotions of an Indian river's life, if one cannot distinguish & thrill to the touch of its various winds, if one cannot clothe its local places with ancient historic & mythical association or people them with the strange host of beautiful & weird figures & faces which the imagination of its people has created, if one does not recreate for himself the ancient splendours of its cities, the sense of peace & infinity in its temples & hermitages and the simple sweetness of its rural life, for him the Meghaduta offers only its shell. But all these, everything that is redolent of India, the visible, material, sensuous India has been fused and poured into one perfect mould by the genius of this supreme artist.

And then as if more utterly to ensnare the imagination of his race, after showing them the beautiful scenes, sights, sounds, scents, the sacred & cherished places, the historic cities

of their country as they are – or alas as they were – he lifts these cherished things into a magic world, bathes them in an immortal beauty. Ullaca, the city without death, is but Kalidasa's beloved Ujjaini taken up into the clouds & transformed into a seat of ideal bliss & loveliness. In the same moment **he strikes straight home at one of the most deepseated feelings in human nature, its repining at the shortness of life & the more tragic shortness of youth, and imaginative dream of an eternal beauty, youth & joy.** These he satisfies and turns from a source of unrest into a new source of pleasure & joy, showing himself the great poet as well as the delicate artist.

The human interest which gives the breath of life to the poem, is exquisitely treated. A faery attendant of Cuvere, God of Wealth, banished for a year from his home & wife sends his imagination travelling on the wings of the northward-bound cloud over the sacred places, the great cities & rivers of India to the snowbound Himaloy and the homes of the Gods. There his mind sees his wife, breathes to her all its sorrow & longing and prays for an answering message. The love described may not be on the highest altitudes, but it is utterly real & human, full of enduring warmth, tenderness & passion, of strife & joy, tears & kisses, the daily food of love."[4]

4. An Early Work of Kalidasa – the "Seasons"

"The "Seasons" of Kalidasa is one of those early works of a great poet which are even more interesting to a student of his evolution than his later masterpieces. We see his characteristic gift even in the immature workmanship and uncertain touch and can distinguish the persistent personality in spite of the defective self-expression. Where external record is scanty, this interest is often disturbed by the question of authenticity, and where there is any excuse for the doubt, it has first to be removed."[5]

I. Authenticity of the "Seasons"

"The impulse which leads us to deny authenticity to early and immature work, is natural and almost inevitable. When we turn from the great harmonies and victorious imaginations of the master to the raw and perhaps faltering workmanship of these uncertain beginnings, we are irresistibly impelled to cry out, 'This is not by the same hand.' But the impulse, however natural, is not always reasonable. The maxim that a poet is born and not made is only true in the sense that great poetical powers are there in the mind of the child, and in this sense the same remark might be applied with no less truth to every species of human genius; philosophers, sculptors, painters, critics, orators, statesmen are all born and not made. But because poetical genius is rarer or at any rate wider and more lasting in its appeal than any other, the popular mind with its ready gift for seizing one aspect of truth out of many and crystallizing error into the form of a proverb, has exalted the

poet into a splendid freak of Nature exempt from the general law. If a man without the inborn oratorical fire may be trained into a good speaker or another without the master's inspiration of form and colour work out for himself a blameless technique, so too may a meagre talent become by diligence a machine for producing elegant verse. But poetic genius needs experience and self-discipline as much as any other, and by its very complexity more than most. This is eminently true of great poets with a varied gift. A narrow though a high faculty works best on a single line and may show perfection at an early stage; but powerful and complex minds like Shakespeare or Kalidasa seldom find themselves before a more advanced period. Their previous work is certain to be full of power, promise and genius, but it will also be flawed, unequal and often imitative. This imperfection arises naturally from the greater difficulty in imposing the law of harmony of their various gifts on the bodily case which is the instrument of the spirit's selfexpression. To arrive at this harmony requires time and effort, and meanwhile the work will often be halting and unequal, varying between inspiration expressed and the failure of vision or expression.

There is no more many-sided, rich and flexible genius in literature than Kalidasa's, and in his case especially we must be on our guard against basing denial of authenticity on imperfection and minor differences. We have to judge, first, by the presence or absence of the essential and indefinable self of Kalidasa which we find apparent in all his indubitable work, however various the form or subject, and after that on those nameable characteristics which are the grain and fibre of his genius and least imitable by others. In the absence of external evidence, which is in itself of little value unless received

from definite and contemporary or almost contemporary sources, the test of personality is all-important. Accidents and details are only useful as corroborative evidence, for these are liable to variation and imitation; but personality is a distinguishable and permanent presence as fugitive to imitation as to analysis. Even a slight fineness of literary palate can perceive the difference between the Nalodaya and Kalidasa's genuine work. Not only does it belong to an age or school in which poetic taste was debased and artificial, – for it is a poetical counterpart of those prose works for whose existence the display of scholarship seems to be the chief justification, – but it presents in this matter of personality and persistent characteristics no sufficient point of contact either with the Shakuntala or the Kumarasambhava or even with the House of Raghu. But in the Seasons, Kalidasa's personality is distinctly perceived as well as his main characteristics, his force of vision, his architecture of style, his pervading sensuousness, the peculiar temperament of his similes, his characteristic strokes of thought and imagination, his individual and inimitable cast of description. Much of it is as yet in a half-developed state, crude consistence not yet fashioned with the masterly touch he soon manifested, but Kalidasa is there quite as evidently as Shakespeare in his earlier work, the Venus and Adonis or Lucrece. Defects which the riper Kalidasa avoids, are not uncommon in this poem, – repetition of ideas, use of more words than are absolutely required, haphazard recurrence of words and phrases, not to produce a designed effect but from carelessness, haste or an insufficient vocabulary; there is moreover a constant sense of uncertainty in the touch and a frequent lack of finished design. The poet has been in too much haste to vent his sense of poetic power

and not sufficiently careful that the expression should be the best he could compass. And yet immature, greatly inferior in chastity and elegance to his best work, marred by serious faults of conception, bearing evidence of hurry and slovenliness in the execution, the Seasons is for all this not only suffused by a high though unchastened beauty, but marked with many of the distinctive signs of Kalidasa's strong and exuberant genius. The defects are those natural to the early work of a rich sensuous temperament, eagerly conscious of poetic power but not yet instructed and chastened."[6]

II. Poetic Value of the "Seasons"

"...the Seasons is not only an interesting document in the evolution of a poetic genius[4] of the first rank, but in itself a work of extraordinary force and immense promise. Many of the most characteristic Kalidasian gifts and tendencies are here, some of them in crude and unformed vigour, but characteristic and unmistakable, giving the poem a striking resemblance of spirit and to some extent of form to the House of Raghu, with a far-off prophecy of the mature manner of Kalidasa in the four great masterpieces. There is his power of felicitous and vivid simile; there is the individual turn of his conceits and the single-minded force with which he drives them home; there is his mastering accuracy and lifelikeness in description conspicuous especially in the choice and building of the circumstantial epithets. That characteristic of the poet, not the most fundamental and important, which most struck the ancient critics, *upamāsu kālidāsaḥ* , Kalidasa for similes, is

[4]Please see Appendix III for a deeper perspective on the phenomenon of genius.

everywhere present even in such early and immature work, and already they have the sharp clear Kalidasian ring, true coin of his mint though not yet possessed of the later high values. The deep blue midsummer sky is like a rich purple mass of ground collyrium; girls with their smiling faces and lovelit eyes are like 'evenings beautifully jewelled with the moon'; the fires burning in the forest look far-off like clear drops of vermilion; the new blades of grass are like pieces of split emerald; rivers embracing and tearing down the trees on their banks are like evil women distracted with passion slaying their lovers. In all these instances we have the Kalidasian simile, a little superficial as yet and self-conscious, but for all that Kalidasian. When again he speaks of the moon towards dawn growing pale with shame at the lovelier brightness of a woman's face, of the rains coming like the pomp of some great king all blazing with lights, huge clouds moving along like elephants, the lightning like a streaming banner and the thunder like a peal of drums, of the clouds like archers shooting their rains at the lover from the rainbow stringed with lightning, one recognises, in spite of the occasional extravagance of phrase and violent fancifulness, the Kalidasian form of conceit, not only in the substance which can be borrowed, but in the wording and most of all in the economy of phrase expressing a lavish and ingenious fancy. Still more is this apparent in the sensuous and elaborate comparison of things in Nature to women in ornamental attire, – rivers, autumn, the night, the pale priyungou creeper.

Most decisive of all are the strokes of vivid description that give the poem its main greatness and fulfil its purpose. The seasons live before our eyes as we read. Summer is here with its sweltering heat, the sunbeams burning like fires of

sacrifice and the earth swept with whirling gyres of dust driven by intolerable gusts. Yonder lies the lion forgetting his impulse and his mighty leap; his tongue lolls and wearily from time to time he shakes his mane; the snake with lowered head panting and dragging his coils labours over the blazing dust of the road; the wild boars are digging in the dried mud with their long snouts as if they would burrow their way into the cool earth; the bisons wander everywhere dumbly desiring water. The forests are grim and parched, brown and sere; and before long they are in the clutch of fire.... But the rains come, and what may be yonder writhing lines we see on the slopes? It is the young water of the rains, a new-born rivulet, grey and full of insects and dust and weeds, coiling like a snake down the hillside. We watch the beauty of the mountains streaked everywhere with waterfalls, their high rocks kissed by the stooping clouds and their sides a gorgeous chaos of peacocks: on the horizon the great clouds blue as lotus-petals climb hugely into the sky and move across it in slow procession before a sluggish breeze. Or look at yonder covidara tree, its branches troubled softly with wind, swarming with honeydrunken bees and its leaves tender with little opening buds. The moon at night gazes down at us like an unveiled face in the skies, the racing stream dashes its ripples in the wild-duck's face, the wind comes trembling through the burdened rice-stalks, dancing with the crowding courboucs, making one flowery ripple of the lotus-wooded lake. Here there can be no longer any hesitation. These descriptions which remain perpetually with the eye, visible and concrete as an actual painting, belong, in the force with which they are visualised and the magnificent architecture of phrase with which they are presented, to Kalidasa alone among Sanskrit

poets. Other poets, his successors or imitators, such as Bana or even Bhavabhuti, overload their description with words and details; they have often lavish colouring but never an equal power of form; their figures do not appear to stand out of the canvas and live.

And though we do not find here quite the marvellous harmonies of verse and diction we meet in the Raghu, yet we do come across plenty of preparation for them. Here for instance is a verse whose rapidity and lightness restrained by a certain half-hidden gravity is distinctly Kalidasa's:

ज्वलति पवनवृद्धः पर्वतानां दरीषु
स्फुटति पटुनिनादैः शुष्कवंशस्थलीषु।
प्रसरति तृणमध्ये लब्ध्वृद्धिः क्षणेन
ग्लपयति मृगवर्गं प्रान्तलग्नो दवाग्निः।।

'Clinging to the woodland edges the forest fire increases with the wind and burns in the glens of the mountains; it crackles with shrill shoutings in the dry bamboo reaches; it spreads in the grasses gathering hugeness in a moment and harasses the beasts of the wilderness.'

And again for honeyed sweetness and buoyancy what can be more Kalidasian than this?

पुंस्कोकिलश्चूतरसासवेन
मत्तः प्रियं चुम्बति रागहृष्टः।
गुञ्जन् द्विरेफोऽप्ययमम्बुजस्थः
प्रियं प्रियायाः प्रकरोति चाटु।।

'The male cuckoo, drunk with wine of the juice of the mango flower, kisses his beloved, glad of the sweet attraction, and here the bee murmuring in the lotus-blossom hums flattery's sweetness to his sweet.'

There are other stanzas which anticipate something of the ripest Kalidasian movements by their gravity, suavity and strength.

आकम्पयन् कुसुमिताः सहकारशाखा
विस्तारयन् परभूतस्य वचांसि दिक्षु।
वायुर्विवाति हृदयानि हरन्नाराणां
नीहारपातविगमात् सुभगो वसन्ते।।

'Making to tremble the flowering branches of the mango trees, spreading the cry of the cuckoo in the regions the wind ranges ravishing the hearts of mortals, by the passing of the dewfalls gracious in the springtide.'

If we take Kalidasa anywhere in his lighter metres we shall at once perceive their essential kinship with the verse of the Seasons.

इदमसुलभवस्तुप्रार्थनादुर्निवारं
प्रथममपि मनो मे पञ्चबाणः क्षिणोति।
किमुत मलयवातोन्मीलितापाण्डुवर्ण-
मुपवनसहकारैर्दर्शितेष्वंकुरेषु।।

'Already Love torments my mind importunate in prayer for a thing unattainable; what shall it be when the woodland mangotrees display their buds, a pallid whiteness opening to the southern wind?'

It is the same suave and skilful management, the same exquisite and unobtrusive weaving of labial, dental and liquid assonances with a recurring sibilant note, the same soft and perfect footing of the syllables. Only the language is richer and more developed. We do not find this peculiar kind of perfection in any other master of classical verse. Bhavabhuti's manner is bold, strenuous, external; Jayadeva's music is based

palpably upon assonance and alliteration which he uses with extraordinary brilliance and builds into the most enchanting melodies, but without delicacy, restraint or disguise. If there were any real cause for doubt of the authorship, the verse would clearly vindicate the Seasons for Kalidasa.

Such is this remarkable poem which some, led away by its undoubted splendours, have put in the first rank of Kalidasa's work. Its artistic defects and its comparative crudity forbid us to follow them. It is uncertain in plan, ill-fused, sometimes raw in its imagery, unequal in its execution. But for all that, it must have come upon its contemporaries like the dawning of a new sun in the skies. Its splendid diction and versification, its vigour, fire and force, its sweetness of spirit and its general promise and to some extent actual presentation of a first-rate poetic genius must have made it a literary event of the first importance. Especially is it significant in its daring gift of sensuousness. The prophet of a hedonistic civilisation here seizes with no uncertain hand on the materials of his work. A vivid and virile interpretation of sense-life in Nature, a similar interpretation of all elements of human life capable of greatness or beauty, seen under the light of the senses and expressed in the terms of an aesthetic appreciation, – this is the spirit of Kalidasa's first work as it is of his last. At present he is concerned only with the outward body of Nature, the physical aspects of things, the vital pleasures and emotions, the joy and beauty of the human body; but it is the first necessary step on the long road of sensuous and poetic experience and expression he has to travel before he reaches his goal in his crowning work, the Birth of the War-God, in which he takes up for treatment one of the supreme fables of the life of the Gods and the Cosmos and in its handling

combines sublimity with grace, height of speech with fullness and beautiful harmony of sound, boldness of descriptive line with magnificence of sensuous colour in a degree of perfection never before or afterwards surpassed or even equalled in poetic literature."[7]

5. The Poetical Genius of Kalidasa

"The classical Sanskrit is perhaps the most remarkably finished and capable instrument of thought yet fashioned, at any rate by either the Aryan or the Semitic mind, lucid with the utmost possible clarity, precise to the farthest limit of precision, always compact and at its best sparing in its formation of phrase, but yet with all this never poor or bare: there is no sacrifice of depth to lucidity, but rather a pregnant opulence of meaning, a capacity of high richness and beauty, a natural grandeur of sound and diction inherited from the ancient days. The abuse of the faculty of compound structure proved fatal later on to the prose, but in the earlier prose and poetry where it is limited, there is an air of continent abundance strengthened by restraint and all the more capable of making the most of its resources. The great and subtle and musical rhythms of the classical poetry with their imaginative, attractive and beautiful names, manifold in capacity, careful in structure, are of themselves a mould that insists on perfection and hardly admits the possibility of a mean or slovenly workmanship or a defective movement. The unit of this poetical art is the *śloka*, the sufficient verse of four quarters or *pādas*, and each *śloka* is expected to be a work of perfect art in itself, a harmonious, vivid and convincing expression of an object, scene, detail, thought, sentiment, state of mind or emotion that can stand by itself as an independent figure; the succession of *ślokas* must be a constant development by addition of completeness to completeness and the whole poem or canto of a long poem an artistic and satisfying structure in this manner, the succession of cantos a progression of definite movements building a total harmony.

It is this carefully artistic and highly cultured type of poetic creation that reached its acme of perfection in the poetry of Kalidasa."[8]

I. Ranking Among Some Supreme Poets of the Past

"Kalidasa ranks[5] among the supreme poetic artists with Milton and Virgil and he has a more subtle and delicate spirit and touch in his art than the English, a greater breath of native power informing and vivifying his execution than the Latin poet. There is no more perfect and harmonious style in literature, no more inspired and careful master of the absolutely harmonious and sufficient phrase combining the minimum of word expenditure with the fullest sense of an accomplished ease and a divine elegance and not excluding a fine excess that is not excessive, an utmost possible refined opulence of aesthetic value. More perfectly than any other he realises the artistic combination of a harmonious economy of expression, not a word, syllable, sound in superfluity, and a total sense of wise and lavish opulence that was the aim of the earlier classical poets. None so divinely skilful as he in imparting without any overdoing the richest colour, charm, appeal and value, greatness or nobility or power or suavity and always some kind and the right kind and the fullest degree of beauty to each line and each phrase. The felicity of selection is equalled by the felicity of combination. One of the most splendidly sensuous of poets in the higher sense of that epithet because he has a vivid vision and feeling of his object, his

[5]Please see Appendix IV for SriAurobindo's ranking of the World's Greatest Poets.

sensuousness is neither lax nor overpowering, but always satisfying and just, because it is united with a plenary force of the intelligence, a gravity and strength sometimes apparent, sometimes disguised in beauty but appreciable within the broidered and coloured robe, a royal restraint in the heart of the regal indulgence. And Kalidasa's sovereign mastery of rhythm is as great as his sovereign mastery of phrase. Here we meet in each metrical kind with the most perfect discoveries of verbal harmony in the Sanskrit language (pure lyrical melody comes only afterwards at the end in one or two poets like Jayadeva), harmonies founded on a constant subtle complexity of the fine assonances of sound and an unobtrusive use of significant cadence that never breaks the fluent unity of tone of the music. And the other quality of Kalidasa's poetry is the unfailing adequacy of the substance. Careful always to get the full aesthetic value of the word and sound clothing his thought and substance, he is equally careful that the thought and the substance itself should be of a high, strong or rich intellectual, descriptive or emotional value. His conception is large in its view though it has not the cosmic breadth of the earlier poets and it is sustained at every step in its execution. The hand of the artist never fails in the management of its material, – exception being made of a fault of composition marring one, the least considerable of his works, – and his imagination is always as equal to its task as his touch is great and subtle."[9]

II. The Mind of Kalidasa

The work to which the supreme poetic qualities of Kalidasa were applied was "very much the same at bottom, though differing in its form and method, as that achieved by

the earlier epics; **it was to interpret in poetic speech and represent in significant images and figures the mind, the life, the culture of India in his age.** Kalidasa's seven extant poems, each in its own way and within its limits and on its level a masterpiece, are a brilliant and delicately ornate roll of pictures and inscriptions with that as their single real subject. His was a richly stored mind, the mind at once of a scholar and observer possessed of all the learning of his time, versed in the politics, law, social idea, system and detail, religion, mythology, philosophy, art of his time, intimate with the life of courts and familiar with the life of the people, widely and very minutely observant of the life of Nature, of bird and beast, season and tree and flower, all the lore of the mind and all the lore of the eye; and this mind was at the same time always that of a great poet and artist. There is not in his work the touch of pedantry or excessive learning that mars the art of some other Sanskrit poets, he knows how to subdue all his matter to the spirit of his art and to make the scholar and observer no more than a gatherer of materials for the poet, but the richness of documentation is there ready and available and constantly brought in as part of incident and description and surrounding idea and forms or intervenes in the brilliant series of images that pass before us in the long succession of magnificent couplets and stanzas. India, her great mountains and forests and plains and their peoples, her men and women and the circumstances of their life, her animals, her cities and villages, her hermitages, rivers, gardens and tilled lands are the background of narrative and drama and love poem. He has seen it all and filled his mind with it and never fails to bring it before us vivid with all the wealth of description of which he is capable. Her ethical and domestic ideals, the life

of the ascetic in the forest or engaged in meditation and austerity upon the mountains and the life of the householder, her familiar customs and social standards and observances, her religious notions, cult, symbols give the rest of the surroundings and the atmosphere. The high actions of gods and kings, the nobler or the more delicate human sentiments, the charm and beauty of women, the sensuous passion of lovers, the procession of the seasons and the scenes of Nature, these are his favourite subjects."[10]

III. The Work of Kalidasa

"He is a true son of his age in his dwelling on the artistic, hedonistic, sensuous sides of experience and preeminently a poet of love and beauty and the joy of life. He represents it also in his intellectual passion for higher things, his intense appreciation of knowledge, culture, the religious idea, the ethical ideal, the greatness of ascetic self-mastery, and these too he makes a part of the beauty and interest of life and sees as admirable elements of its complete and splendid picture. All his work is of this tissue. His great literary epic, the 'House of Raghu', treats the story of a line of ancient kings as representative of the highest religious and ethical culture and ideals of the race and brings out its significances environed with a splendid decoration of almost pictorially depicted sentiment and action, noble or beautiful thought and speech and vivid incident and scene and surrounding. Another unfinished epic, a great fragment but by the virtue of his method of work complete in itself so far as the tale proceeds, is in subject a legend of the gods, the ancient subject of a strife of Gods and Titans, the solution prepared here by a union of the supreme God and the Goddess, but in treatment

it is a description of Nature and the human life of India raised to a divine magnitude on the sacred mountain and in the homes of the high deities. His three dramas move around the passion of love, but with the same insistence on the detail and picture of life. One poem unrolls the hued series of the seasons of the Indian year. Another leads the messenger cloud across northern India viewing as it passes the panorama of her scenes and closes on a vivid and delicately sensuous and emotional portrayal of the passion of love. In these varied settings we get a singularly complete impression of the mind, the tradition, the sentiment, the rich, beautiful and ordered life of the India of the times, not in its very deepest things, for these have to be sought elsewhere, but in what was for the time most characteristic, the intellectual, vital and artistic turn of that period of her culture."[11]

6. The Other Great Literary Works of Kalidasa's Age

The other poetry of the times is of "one fundamental type with Kalidasa's; for it has with individual variations the same thought mind, temperament, general materials, poetic method, and much of it has a high genius or an unusual quality and distinction though not the same perfection, beauty and felicity. The literary epics of Bharavi and Magha reveal the beginning of the decline marked by the progressive encroachment of a rhetorical and laborious standard of form, method and manner that heavily burdens and is bound eventually to stifle the poetic spirit, an increasing artificiality of tradition and convention and gross faults of taste that bear evidence of the approaching transmission of the language out of the hands of the literary creator into the control of the Pundit and pedant.Magha's poem is more constructed by rule of rhetoric than created and he displays as merits the very worst puerilities of melodious jingle, intricate acrostic and laborious double meaning. Bharavi is less attainted by the decadence, but not immune, and he suffers himself to be betrayed by its influence to much that is neither suitable to his temperament and genius nor in itself beautiful or true. Nevertheless Bharavi has high qualities of grave poetic thinking and epic sublimity of description and Magha poetic gifts that would have secured for him a more considerable place in literature if the poet had not been crossed with a pedant. In this mixture of genius with defect of taste and manner the later classical poets resemble the Elizabethans with the difference that in one case the incoherence is the result of

a crude and still unripe, in the other of an overripe and decadent culture. At the same time they bring out very prominently the character of this age of Sanskrit literature, its qualities but also its limitations that escape the eye in Kalidasa and are hidden in the splendour of his genius.

This poetry is preeminently a ripe and deliberate poetic representation and criticism of thought and life and the things that traditionally interested an aristocratic and cultured class in a very advanced and intellectual period of civilisation. The intellect predominates everywhere and, even when it seems to stand aside and leave room for pure objective presentation, it puts on that too the stamp of its image. **In the earlier epics the thought, religion, ethics, life movements are all strongly lived; the poetic intelligence is at work but always absorbed in its work, self-forgetful and identified with its object, and it is this that is the secret of their great creative force and living poetic sincerity and power. The later poets are interested in the same things but with an intensely reflective experience and critical intelligence that always observes more than it lives with its objects.** In the literary epics there is no real movement of life, but only a close brilliant description of life. The poet makes to pass before us a series of pictured incidents, scenes, details, figures, attitudes richly coloured, exact, vivid, convincing to the eye and attractive, but in spite of the charm and interest we speedily perceive that these are only animated pictures. Things are indeed seen vividly but with the more outer eye of the imagination, observed by the intellect, reproduced by the sensuous imagination of the poet, but they have not been deeply lived in the spirit. Kalidasa alone is immune from this deficiency of the method because there is in him a great

thinking, imaginative, sensuous poetic soul that has lived and creates what he pictures and does not merely fabricate brilliant scenes and figures. The rest only occasionally rise above the deficiency and do then great and not only brilliant or effective work. Their ordinary work is so well done as to deserve great and unstinted praise for what it possesses, but not the highest praise. It is in the end more decorative than creative. There ensues from the character of this poetic method a spiritual consequence, that we see here very vividly the current thought, ethics, aesthetic culture, active and sense life of contemporary India, but not the deeper soul of these things so much as their outer character and body. **There is much ethical and religious thought of a sufficiently high ideal kind, and it is quite sincere but only intellectually sincere, and therefore there is no impression of the deeper religious feeling or the living ethical power that we get in the Mahabharata and Ramayana and in most of the art and literature of India. The ascetic life is depicted, but only in its ideas and outward figure: the sensuous life is depicted in the same scrupulous manner – it is intensely observed and appreciated and well reproduced to the eye and the intelligence, but not intensely felt and created in the soul of the poet. The intellect has become too detached and too critically observant to live things with the natural force of the life or with the intuitive identity. This is the quality and also the malady of an overdeveloped intellectualism and it has always been the forerunner of a decadence.**

The predominantly intellectual turn appears in the abundance of another kind of writing, the gnomic verse, *subhāṣita*. This is the use of the independent completeness of

the *śloka* to be the body in its single sufficiency of the concentrated essence and expression of a thought, an aperçu or significant incident of life, a sentiment so expressed as to convey its essential idea to the intelligence. There is a great plenty of this kind of work admirably done; for it was congenial to the keen intellect and the wide, mature and well-stored experience of the age: but in the work of Bhartrihari it assumes the proportions of genius, because he writes not only with the thought but with emotion, with what might be called a moved intellectuality of the feeling and an intimate experience that gives great potency and sometimes poignancy to his utterance. There are three centuries or *śatakas* of his sentences, the first expressing high ethical thought or worldly wisdom or brief criticisms of aspects of life, the second concerned with erotic passion, much less effective because it is the fruit of curiosity and the environment rather than the poet's own temperament and genius, and the third proclaiming an ascetic weariness and recoil from the world. Bhartrihari's triple work is significant of the three leading motives of the mind of the age, its reflective interest in life and turn for high and strong and minute thinking, its preoccupation with the enjoyment of the senses, and its ascetic spiritual turn – the end of the one and the ransom of the other. It is significant too by the character of this spirituality; it is no longer the great natural flight of the spirit to the fullness of its own high domain, but rather a turning away of the intellect and the senses wearied of themselves and life, unable to find there the satisfaction they sought, to find peace in a spiritual passivity in which the tired thought and sense could find their absolute rest and cessation.

The drama however is the most attractive though not

therefore the greatest product of the poetical mind of the age. There its excessive intellectuality was compelled by the necessities of dramatic poetry to be more closely and creatively identified with the very mould and movement of life. The Sanskrit drama type is a beautiful form and it has been used in most of the plays that have come down to us with an accomplished art and a true creative faculty. **At the same time it is true that it does not rise to the greatnesses of the Greek or the Shakespearian drama. This is not due to the elimination of tragedy, – for there can be dramatic creation of the greatest kind without a solution in death, sorrow, overwhelming calamity or the tragic return of Karma, a note that is yet not altogether absent from the Indian mind, – for it is there in the Mahabharata and was added later on to the earlier triumphant and victorious close of the Ramayana; but a closing air of peace and calm was more congenial to the sattwic turn of the Indian temperament and imagination. It is due to the absence of any bold dramatic treatment of the great issues and problems of life.** These dramas are mostly romantic plays reproducing the images and settled paces of the most cultured life of the time cast into the frame of old myth and legend, but a few are more realistic and represent the type of the citizen householder or other scenes of the times or a historical subject. The magnificent courts of kings or the beauty of the surroundings of Nature are their more common scene. But whatever their subject or kind, they are only brilliant transcripts or imaginative transmutations of life, and something more is needed for the very greatest or most moving dramatic creation. But their type still admits of a high or a strong or delicate poetry and a representation, if not any

very profound interpretation of human action and motive and they do not fall short in this kind. **A great charm of poetic beauty and subtle feeling and atmosphere, – reaching its most accomplished type in the Shakuntala of Kalidasa, the most perfect and captivating romantic drama in all literature,** – or an interesting turn of sentiment and action, a skilful unobtrusive development according to the recognised principle and carefully observed formula of the art, in temperate measure without violent noise of incident or emphatic stress on situation or crowded figures, the movement subdued to a key of suavity and calm, a delicate psychology, not a strongly marked characterisation such as is commonly demanded in the dramatic art of Europe, but a subtle indication by slight touches in the dialogue and action, these are the usual characteristics. It is an art that was produced by and appealed to a highly cultured class, refined, and intellectual and subtle, loving best a tranquil aesthetic charm, suavity and beauty, and it has the limitations of the kind but also its qualities. **There is a constant grace and fineness of work in the best period, a plainer and more direct but still fine vigour in Bhasa and the writers who prolong him, a breath of largeness and power in the dramas of Bhavabhuti, a high and consummate beauty in the perfection of Kalidasa.**

This drama, this poetry, the prose romances crowded with descriptive detail, monographs like Bana's biography of Harsha or Jonaraja's history of Cashmere, the collections of religious or romantic or realistic tales, the Jatakas, the Kathasaritsagara with its opulence and inexhaustible abundance of narrative in verse, the Panchatantra and the more concise Hitopadesha which develop the form of the

animal fable to make a piquant setting for a mass of acute worldly wisdom and policy and statecraft, and a great body of other less known work are only the surviving remnants of what, as many indications show, must have been an immense literary activity, but **they are sufficiently abundant and representative to create a crowded and splendid impression, a many-toned picture of a high culture, a rich intellectuality, a great and ordered society with an opulent religious, aesthetic, ethical, economic, political and vital activity, a many-sided development, a plentiful life-movement.** As completely as the earlier epics they belie the legend of an India lost in metaphysics and religious dreamings and incapable of the great things of life. The other element which has given rise to this conception, an intense strain of philosophic thinking and religious experience, follows in fact at this time an almost separate movement and develops gradually behind the pomp and motion of this outward action the thought, the influences, the temperament and tendencies that were to govern another millennium of the life of the Indian people."[12]

Appendix – I

A Note on Translating Great Poetry

"Since the different tribes of the human Babel began to study each other's literatures, the problem of poetical translation has constantly defied the earnest experimenter. There have been brilliant versions, successful falsifications, honest renderings, but some few lyrics apart a successful translation there has not been. Yet it cannot be that a form of effort so earnestly & persistently pursued and so necessary to the perfection of culture and advance of civilisation, is the vain pursuit of a chimera. Nothing which mankind earnestly attempts is impossible, not even the conversion of copper into gold or the discovery of the elixir of life or the power of aerial motion; but so long as experiment proceeds on mistaken lines, based on a mistaken conception of the very elements of the problem, it must necessarily fail. Man may go on fashioning wings for himself for ever but they will never lift him into the empyrean: the essence of the problem is to conquer the attraction of the earth which cannot be done by any material means. Poetical translation was long dominated by the superstition that the visible word is the chief factor in language and the unit which must be seized on as a basis in rendering; the result is seen in so-called translations which reproduce the sense of the original faultlessly & yet put us into an atmosphere which we at once recognize to be quite alien to the atmosphere of the original; we say then that the rendering is a faithful one or a success of esteem or a makeshift or a caput mortuum according to the nature of our predilections and the measure of our urbanity. The

nineteenth century has been the first to recognize generally that there is a spirit behind the word & dominating the word which eludes the "faithful" translator and that it is more important to get at the spirit of a poet than his exact sense. But after its manner it has contented itself with the generalisation and not attempted to discover the lines on which the generalisation must be crystallised into practice, its extent & its limitations. Every translator has been a law to himself; and the result is anarchic confusion. As the sole tangible benefit there has been discovered a new art not yet perfected of translation into prose poetry. Such translation has many advantages; it allows the translator to avail himself of manifold delicacies of rhythm without undergoing the labour of verse formation and to compromise with the orthodox superstition by rendering the word unit yet with some show of preserving the original flavour. But even in the best of these translations it is little more than a beautiful show. Poetry can only be translated by poetry and verse forms by verse forms. It remains to approach the task of translation in a less haphazard spirit, to realise our essential aim, to define exactly what elements in poetry demand rendering, how far & by what law of equivalent values each may be rendered and if all cannot be reproduced, which of them may in each particular case be sacrificed without injuring the essential worth of the translation. Most of the translations of Kalidasa here offered to the public have been written after the translator had arrived at such a definite account with himself and in conscientious conformity to its results. Others done while he yet saw his goal no more than dimly and was blindly working his way to the final solution, may not be so satisfactory. I do not pretend that I have myself arrived at the right method;

but I am certain that reasoned & thoughtful attempts of this sort can alone lead to it. Now that nations are turning away from the study of the great classical languages to physical & practical science and resorting even to modern languages, if for literature at all then for contemporary literature, **it is imperative that the ennobling infiuences spiritual, romantic & imaginative of the old tongues should be popularised in modern speech; otherwise the modern world, vain of its fancied superiority & limiting itself more & more to its own type of ideas with no opportunity of saving immersions in the past & recreative destructions of the present, will soon petrify & perish in the mould of a rigid realism & materialism.** Among their influences the beauty & power of their secular & religious poetry is perhaps the most potent & formative.[13]

Appendix – II

The Historical Method

"Of Kalidasa, the man who thus represents one of the greatest periods in our civilisation and typifies somany sides and facets of it in his writing, we know if possible even less than of Valmekie and Vyasa. It is probable but not certain that he was a native of Malwa born not in the capital Ujjaini, but in one of those villages of which he speaks in the Cloud-Messenger and that he afterwards resorted to the capital and wrote under the patronage of the great Vicramaditya who founded the era of the Malavas in the middle of the first century before Christ. Of his attainments, his creed, his character we may gather something from his poetry, but external facts we have none. There is indeed a mass of apocryphal anecdotes about him couching a number of witticisms & ingenuities mostly ribald, but these may be safely discredited. **Valmekie, Vyasa and Kalidasa, our three greatest names, are to us, outside their poetical creation, names merely and nothing more.**

This is an exceedingly fortunate circumstance. The natural man within us rebels indeed against such a void; who Kalidasa was, what was his personal as distinguished from his poetic individuality, what manner of man was the great King whose patronage he enjoyed, who were his friends, who his rivals and how he dealt with either or both, whether or not he was a lover of wine & women in practice as well as in imagination, under what special surroundings he wrote and who were the minds by whom he was most influenced, all this the natural man clamours to know; and yet all these are things

we are very fortunate not to know. The historical method is certainly an attractive one and it leads to some distinct advantages, for it decidedly aids those who are not gifted with fine insight and literary discrimination, to understand certain sides of a poet's work more clearly and intelligently. But while it increases our knowledge of the workings of the human mind it does not in the end assist or improve our critical appreciation of poetry; it helps to an understanding of the man and of those aspects of his poetry which concern his personal individuality but it obstructs our clear and accurate impression of the work and its value. The supporters of the historical method put the cart before the horse and placing themselves between the shafts do a great deal of useless though heroic labour in dragging both. They insist on directing that attention to the poet which should be directed to the poem. After assimilating a man's literary work and realising its value first to ourselves and then in relation to the eternal nature and scope of poetry, we may and indeed must, – for if not consciously aimed at, it must have been insensibly formed in the mind, – attempt to realize to ourselves an idea of his poetic individuality from the data he himself has provided for us; and the idea so formed will be the individuality of the man so far as we can assimilate him, the only part of him therefore that is of real value to us. The individuality of Shakespeare as expressed in his recorded actions & his relations to his contemporaries is a matter of history and has nothing to do with appreciation of his poetry. It may interest me as a study of human character & intellect but I have no concern with it when I am reading Hamlet or even when I am reading the Sonnets; on the contrary it may often come between me and the genuine revelation of the poet in his work,

for actions seldom reveal more than the outer, bodily and sensational man while his word takes us within to the mind and the reason, the receiving and the selecting parts of him which are his truer self. It maymatter to the pedant or the gossip within me whether the sonnets were written to William Herbert or to Henry Wriothesley or to William Himself, whether the dark woman whom Shakespeare loved against his better judgment was Mary Fitton or someone else or nobody at all, whether the language is that of hyperbolical compliment to a patron or that of an actual passionate affection; but to the lover of poetry in me these things do not matter at all. It may be a historical fact that Shakespeare when he sat down to write these poems intended to use the affected language of conventional and fulsome flattery; if so, it does not exalt our idea of his character; but after all it was only the bodily and sensational case of that huge spirit which so intended, – the food-sheath and the life-sheath of him, to use Hindu phraseology; but the mind, the soul which was the real Shakespeare felt, as he wrote, every phase of the passion he was expressing to the very utmost, felt precisely those exultations, chills of jealousy and disappointment, noble affections, dark and unholy fires, and because he felt them, he was able so to express them that the world still listens and is moved. The passion was there in the soul of the man, – whether as a potential force or an experience from a past life, matters very little, – and it forms therefore part of his poetic individuality. But if we allow the alleged historical fact to interfere between us and this individuality, the feelings with which we ought to read the Sonnets, admiration, delight, sympathy, rapt interest in a soul struggling through passion towards self-realisation, will be disturbed by other feelings

of disgust and nausea or at the best pity for a man who with such a soul within him, prostituted its powers to the interests of his mere bodily covering. Both our realisation of the true Shakespeare & our enjoyment of his poetry will thus be cruelly and uselessly marred. This is the essential defect which vitiates the theory of the man and his milieu. The man in Dr.. Johnson expressed himself in his conversation and therefore his own works are far less important to us than Boswell's record of his daily talk; the man in Byron expresses himself in his letters as well as his poetry and both have therefore to be read. It is only the most sensational and therefore the lowest natures that express themselves mainly by their actions. In the case of great poets with whom expression is an instrument that answers spontaneously and accurately to the touch of the soul, it is in their work that we shall find them, the whole of them and not only that meagre part which struggled out brokenly and imperfectly in the shape of action. It is really this difference that makes the great figures of epic poetry so much less intimately and thoroughly known to us than the great figures of drama. Kalidasa was both an epic poet and a dramatist, yet Sheva and Parvatie are merely grand paintings while Dushyanta, Shacountala, Sharngarava, Priyumvada & Anasuya, Pururavus and Urvasie and Chitraleqha, Dharinie and Iravatie and Agnimitra are living beings who are our friends, whom we know. The difference arises from the importance of speech in self-revelation and the comparative inadequacy of acts, except as a corroboration or a check. The only epics which have creations equal to dramatic creation in their nearness to us are the Mahabharata and the Ramayan; and the art-form of those far more closely resembles the methods of the modern novel than those of epic poetry as it

is understood in Europe; they combine, that is to say, the dramatic method with the epic and introduce a minuteness of observant detail with which European poets would have shrunk from tempting the patience of the sensational and soon-wearied West.

The importance of the milieu to criticism has likewise been immensely exaggerated. It is important as literary history, but history is not criticism; a man may have a very wide and curious knowledge of literary history and yet be a very poor critic and the danger of the present times lies in the immense multiplication of literary historians with their ass's load of facts and theories and opinions and tendencies and the comparative rarity of really illuminating critics. I do not say that these things are not in a measure necessary but they are always the scaffolding and not the pile. The tendency of the historical method beginning with and insisting on the poet rather than the poem is to infer from him as a "man" the meaning & value of his poetry, – a vicious process for it concentrates the energies on the subordinate and adds the essential as an appendix. It has been said that in a rightly constituted mind the knowledge of the man and his milieu will help to a just appreciation of his poetry; but this knowledge in its nature rather distorts our judgment than helps it, for instead of giving an honest account to ourselves of the impression naturally made by the poem on us, we are irresistibly led to cut & carve that impression so as to make it square with our knowledge and the theories, more or less erroneous & ephemeral, we deduce from that knowledge. We proceed from the milieu to the poem, instead of arguing from the poem to the milieu. Yet the latter is the only fair method, for it is not the whole of the milieu that affects the man nor

every part of it that affects him equally; the extent to which it affects him and the distribution of its various influences can only be judged from the poem itself.

The milieu of Shakespeare or of Homer or of Kalidasa so far as it is important to an appreciation of their poetry, can be gathered from their poetry itself, and a knowledge of the history of the times would only litter the mind with facts which are of no real value as they mislead and embarrass the judgment instead of assisting it. This is at least the case with all poets who represent their age in some or most of its phases and with those who do not do this, the milieu is of very small importance. We know from literary history that Marlowe and Kyd and other writers exercised no little influence on Shakespeare in his young and callow days; and it may be said in passing that all poets of the first order & even many of the second are profoundly influenced by the inferior and sometimes almost worthless work which was in vogue at the time of their early efforts, but they have the high secret of mental alchemy which can convert not merely inferior metal but even refuse into gold. It is only poets of a onesided or minor genius who can afford to be aggressively original. Now as literary history, as psychology, as part of the knowledge of intellectual origins this is a highly important and noteworthy fact. But in the task of criticism what do we gain by it? We have simply brought the phantoms of Marlowe & Kyd between ourselves and what we are assimilating and so disturbed & blurred the true picture of it that was falling on our souls; and if we know our business, the first thing we shall do is to banish those intruding shadows and bring ourselves once more face to face with Shakespeare.

The historical method leads besides to much confusion

and is sometimes a veil for a bastard impressionism and sometimes a source of literary insincerity or at the best anaemic catholicity. As often as not a critic studies, say, the Elizabethan age because he has a previous sympathy with the scattered grandeurs, the hasty and vehement inequalities, the profuse mixture of flawed stones, noble gems and imitation jewellery with which that school overwhelms us. In that case the profession with which he starts is insincere, for he professes to base his appreciation on study, whereas his study begins from, continues with and ends in appreciation. Often on the contrary he studies as a duty and praises in order to elevate his study; because he has perused all and understood all, he must sympathise with all, or where is the proof of his having understood? Perfect intelligence of a man's character and work implies a certain measure of sympathy and liking; antipathy has only half sight and indifference is blind. Hence much false criticism misleading the public intelligence and causing a confusion in critical weights & measures, a depreciation of the literary currency from which in the case of the frank impressionist we are safe. In mere truth the historical method is useful only with inferior writers who not having had full powers of expression are more interesting than their work; but even here it has led to that excessive and often absurd laudation of numberless small names in literature, many of them "discoveries", which is the curse of latter day criticism. The historical method is in fact the cloven foot of science attempting to insinuate itself into the fair garden of Poetry. By this I mean no disrespect to Science. The devil is a gentleman, & Shakespeare himself has guaranteed his respectability; but he is more than that, he is a highly useful and even indispensable personage. So also is Science not only

a respectable branch of intellectual activity, – when it does not indulge its highly civilized propensity for cutting up live animals, – but it is also a useful and indispensable branch. But the devil had no business in Paradise and Science has no business in the sphere of Poetry. The work of Science is to collect facts and generalize from them; the smallest and meanest thing is as important to it as the highest, the weed no less than the flower and the bug that crawls & stinks no less than man who is a little lower than the angels. By introducing this method into criticism, we are overloading ourselves with facts and stifling the literary field with the host of all the mediocrities more or less "historically" important but at any rate deadly dull & uninspiring, who at one time or another had the misfortune to take themselves for literary geniuses. And just as scientific history tends to lose individual genius in movements, so the historical method tends to lose the individual poem in tendencies. **The result is that modern poets instead of holding up before them as their ideal the expression of the great universal feelings and thoughts which sway humanity, tend more and more to express tendencies, problems, realisms, romanticisms, mysticisms and all the other local & ephemeral aberrations with which poetry has no business whatever. It is the sign of a decadent & morbid age which is pushing itself by the mass of its own undigested learning into Alexandrianism and scholasticism, cutting itself off from the fountainheads of creation and wilfully preparing its own decline and sterility.** The age of which Callimachus & Apollonius of Rhodes were the Simonides &the Homer and the age of which Tennyson is the Shakespeare & Rudyard Kipling the Milton present an ominous resemblance."[14]

Appendix – III

The Phenomenon of Genius

"The imagination of the West has not been trained to recognize that the body is an entity different and initially independent of the spirit within. Yet such a division helps materially to the proper understanding of man & is indeed essential to it unless we rule out a great mass of recorded experience as false or illusory. Each cell out of which the body is built has a life of its own and therefore tendencies of its own. These tendencies are largely, if not entirely determined by heredity. **The spirit too comes into the womb with an individuality already determined, a future development already built up; and its struggle is to impose the law of that individuality and that development on the plasm of matter in which it has to encase itself.** It is naturally attracted to birth in a race & a family where the previous dispositions are favourable to the production of a suitable body; and in the case of great minds this is oftenest where attempts at genius have occurred before, attempts which being unsuccessful have not unfrequently led to madness & physical or moral disease resulting from the refusal of the body to bear the strain of the spirit. Even from the womb it struggles to impose itself on the embryonic plasm, to build up the cells of the brain to its liking and stamp its individuality on every part of the body. Throughout childhood and youth the struggle proceeds; the spirit not so much developing itself, as developing the body into an image of itself, accustoming the body to express it & respond to its impulses as a musical instrument responds to the finger of the performer. And therefore it is that the

Upanishad speaks of the body as the harp of the spirit. Hence natural gifts aremuch more valuable and work with much more freedom and power than acquired; for when we acquire, we are preparing fresh material for our individuality in another existence; when we follow our gifts, we are using what we have already prepared for this. In the first case we are painful & blundering learners, in the second to the extent we have prepared ourselves, masters. This process of subjecting the personality of the body to the personality of the spirit, of finding one's self, lasts for various periods with various men. But it is seldom really over before the age of 30 in men of a rich and varied genius, and even afterwards they never cease sounding themselves still farther, finding fresh possibilities, developing mightier masteries, until the encasing plasm wears away with the strain of life. The harp grows old & shabby, the strings are worn and frayed, the music deteriorates or ceases, and finally the spirit breaks & throws away its instrument and departs to assimilate its experiences and acquirements for a fresh existence. **But that the man of genius may successfully find himself, he must have fit opportunities, surroundings, influences, training. If he is not favoured with these, the genius will remain but it will be at the mercy of its body; it will express its body and not its self.** The most famous ballads, those which never perish, have been written by such thwarted geniuses. Although the influence of romanticism has made it a literary fashion to couple these ballads with Homer, yet in truth ballad writing is the lowest form of the poetical art; its method is entirely sensational. The impact of outward facts on the body is carried through the vital principle, the sensational element in man, to the mind, and mind obediently answers the knocking outside, photographs the impression with force & definiteness.

But there has been no exercise of the higher faculty of understanding, considering, choosing, moulding what it receives. Hence the bare force & realism which so powerfully attracts in the best ballads; but this force is very different from the high strength and this involuntary realism very different from the artistic imaginative & self-chosen realism of great poetry. There is the same difference as separates brilliant melodrama from great tragedy. Another sign of the undeveloped self is uncertainty of work. There are some poets who live by a single poem. In some moment of exaltation, of rapt excitement the spirit throws off for a moment the bonds of the flesh and compels the body to obey it. This is what is vulgarly termed inspiration. Everyone who has felt this state of mind, can recall its main features. There is a sudden exaltation, a glow, an excitement and a fiery and rapid activity of all the faculties; every cell of the body & of the brain feeling a commotion and working in excited unison under the law of something which is not themselves; the mind itself becomes illuminated as with a rush of light and grows like a crowded and surging thoroughfare in some brilliantly lighted city, thought treading on the heels of thought faster than the tongue can express or the hand write or the memory record them. And yet while the organs of sense remain overpowered and inactive, the main organs of action may be working with abnormal rapidity, not only the speech and the hand but sometimes even the feet, so that often the writer cannot remain still, but has to walk up and down swiftly or if he sits down, is subject to an involuntary mechanical movement of the limbs. **When this state reaches beyond bounds, when the spirit attempts to impose on the mind & body work for which they are not fitted, the result is, in the lower human organisms insanity, in the higher epilepsy.**

In this state of inspiration every thought wears an extraordinary brilliance and even commonplace ideas strike one as God-given inspirations. But at any rate the expression they take whether perfect or not is superior to what the same man could compass in his ordinary condition. Ideas & imaginations throng on the mind which one is not aware of having formerly entertained or even prepared for; some even seem quite foreign to our habit of mind. The impression we get is that thoughts are being breathed into us, expressions dictated, the whole poured in from outside; **the saints who spoke to Joan of Arc, the daemon of Socrates, Tasso's familiar, the Angel Gabriel dictating the Koran to Mahomet are only exaggerated developments of this impression due to an epileptic, maniac or excited state of the mind; and this, as I have already suggested, is itself due to the premature attempts of the Spirit to force the highest work on the body. Mahomet's idea that in his epileptic fits he went up into the seventh heaven & took the Koran from the lips of God, is extremely significant; if Caesar & Richelieu had been Oriental prophets instead of practical & sceptical Latin statesmen they might well have recorded kindred impressions. In any case such an impression is purely sensational.** It is always the man's own spirit that is speaking, but the sensational part of him feeling that it is working blindly in obedience to some irresistible power which is not itself, conveys to the mind an erroneous impression that the power comes from outside, that it is an inspiration and not an inner process; for it is as naturally the impulse of the body as of the mind to consider itself *the* self of the organism and all impressions & impulses not of its own sphere as exterior to the organism. If the understanding happens to be firm and sane,

it refuses to encourage the mind in its error, but if the understanding is overexcited or is not sufficiently master of its instruments, it easily allows itself to be deluded. Now when the spirit is no longer struggling with the body, but has become its master and lord, this state of inspiration ceases to be fortuitous and occasional, and becomes more and more within the will of the man and, subject to the necessarily long intervals of repose & recreation, almost a habitually recurring state. At the same time it loses its violent & abnormal character and the outward symptoms of it disappear; the outer man remains placid and the mind works with great power and illumination indeed, but without disturbance or loss of equilibrium. In the earlier stages the poet swears & tears his hair if a fly happens to be buzzing about the room; once he has found himself, he can rise from his poem, have a chat with his wife or look over & even pay his bills and then resume his inspiration as if nothing had happened. He needs no stimulant except healthy exercise and can no longer be classed with the genus irritabile vatum; nor does he square any better with the popular idea that melancholy, eccentricity and disease are necessary concomitants of genius. **Shakespeare, Milton, Dante, Sophocles, Aeschylus, Goethe, the really great poets, were men of high sanity – except perhaps in the eyes of those to whom originality & strong character are in themselves madness.**

But to arrive at this harmony requires time and effort and meanwhile the work will surely be unequal, often halting, varying between inspiration and failure. Especially will this be the case with a rich, many-sided and flexible genius like Kalidasa's.[15]

Appendix – IV

The World's Greatest Poets

"Goethe certainly goes much deeper than Shakespeare; he had an incomparably greater intellect than the English poet and sounded problems of life and thought Shakespeare had no means of approaching even. But he was certainly not a greater poet; I do not find myself very ready to admit either that he was Shakespeare's equal. He wrote out of a high poetic intelligence, but his style and movement nowhere come near the poetic power, the magic, the sovereign expression and profound or subtle rhythms of Shakespeare. Shakespeare was a supreme poet and, one might almost say, nothing else; Goethe was by far the greater man and the greater brain, but he was a poet by choice, his mind's choice among its many high and effulgent possibilities, rather than by the very necessity of his being. He wrote his poetry, as he did everything else, with a great skill and effective genius and an inspired subtlety of language, but it was only part of his genius and not the whole. There is too a touch mostly wanting in spite of his strength and excellence, – the touch of an absolute, an intensely inspired or revealing inevitability; few quite supreme poets have that in abundance, in others it comes only by occasional jets or flashes.

When I said there were no greater poets than Homer and Shakespeare, I was thinking of their essential poetic force and beauty – not of the scope of their work as a whole, for there are poets greater in their range. The Mahabharata is from that point of view a far greater creation than the Iliad, the Ramayana than the Odyssey, and either spreads its strength

and its achievement over a larger field than the whole dramatic world of Shakespeare; both are built on an almost cosmic vastness of plan and take all human life (the Mahabharata all human thought as well) in their scope and touch too on things which the Greek and Elizabethan poets could not even glimpse. But as poets – as masters of rhythm and language and the expression of poetic beauty – Vyasa and Valmiki are *not inferior*, but also not greater than the English or the Greek poet. We can leave aside for the moment the question whether the Mahabharata was not the creation of the mind of a people rather than of a single poet, for that doubt has been raised also with regard to Homer.

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You once spoke of Goethe as not being one of the world's absolutely supreme singers. Who are these, then? Homer, Dante, Shakespeare, Valmiki, Kalidasa? And what about Aeschylus, Virgil and Milton?

I suppose all the names you mention except Goethe can be included; or if you like you can put them all including Goethe in three rows—e.g.:

1st row Homer, Shakespeare, Valmiki

2nd row Dante, Kalidasa, Aeschylus, Virgil, Milton

3rd row Goethe

and there you are! To speak less flippantly, the first three have at once supreme imaginative originality, supreme poetic gift, widest scope and supreme creative genius. Each is a sort of poetic Demiurge who has created a world of his own. Dante's triple world beyond is more constructed by the poetic seeing mind than by this kind of elemental demiurgic power – otherwise he would rank by their side; the same with

Kalidasa. Aeschylus is a seer and creator but on a much smaller scale. Virgil and Milton have a less spontaneous breath of creative genius; one or two typal figures excepted, they live rather by what they have said than by what they have made.

31 March 1932

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Is the omission of Vyasa deliberate?

It was you who omitted Vyasa, Sophocles and others – not I.

Yes, I plead guilty. But that, I hope, will be no reason why Vyasa and Sophocles should remain unclassified by you. And "the others" – they intrigue me even more. Who are these others? Saintsbury as good as declares that poetry is Shelley and Shelley poetry – Spenser alone, to his mind, can contest the right to that equation. (Shakespeare, of course, is admittedly hors concours.) Aldous Huxley abominates Spenser : the fellow has got nothing to say and says it with a consummately cloying melodiousness! Swinburne, as is well known, could never think of Victor Hugo without bursting into half a dozen alliterative superlatives, while Matthew Arnold it was, I believe, who pitied Hugo for imagining that poetry consisted in using "divinité", "infinité" "éternité", as lavishly as possible. And then there is Keats, whose Hyperion compelled even the sneering Byron to forget his usual condescending attitude towards "Johnny" and confess that nothing grander had been seen since Aeschylus. Racine, too, cannot be left out – can he? Voltaire adored him, Voltaire who called Shakespeare a drunken barbarian. Finally, what of Wordsworth, whose Immortality Ode was hailed by Mark Pattison as the ne plus ultra of English poetry since the days of Lycidas? Kindly shed the light of infallible viveka on this chaos of jostling opinions.

I am not prepared to classify all the poets in the universe – it was the front bench or benches you asked for. By others I meant poets like Lucretius, Euripides, Calderon, Corneille, Hugo. Euripides (*Medea, Bacchae* and other plays) is a greater poet than Racine whom you want to put in the first ranks. If you want only the very greatest, none of these can enter – only Vyasa and Sophocles. Vyasa could very well claim a place beside Valmiki, Sophocles beside Aeschylus. The rest, if you like, you can send into the third row with Goethe, but it is something of a promotion about which one can feel some qualms. Spenser too, if you like; it is difficult to draw a line.

Shelley, Keats and Wordsworth have not been brought into consideration although their best work is as fine poetry as any written, but they have written nothing on a larger scale which would place them among the greatest creators. If Keats had finished *Hyperion* (without spoiling it), if Shelley had lived, or if Wordsworth had not petered out like a motor car with insufficient petrol, it might be different, but we have to take things as they are. As it is, all began magnificently, but none of them finished, and what work they did, except a few lyrics, sonnets, short pieces and narratives, is often flawed and unequal. If they had to be admitted, what about at least fifty others in Europe and Asia?"[16]

List of References:

1. *CWSA 20, Pages 354-357*
2. *CWSA 1, Pages 152-55*
3. *CWSA 1, Pages 156-67*
4. *CWSA 1, Pages 236-38*
5. *CWSA 1, Page 175*
6. *CWSA 1, Pages 175-77*
7. *CWSA 1, Pages 181-86*
8. *CWSA 20, Pages 357-58*
9. *CWSA 20, Pages 358-60*
10. *CWSA 20, Pages 360-61*
11. *CWSA 20, Pages 361-62*
12. *CWSA 20, Pages 362-67*
13. *CWSA 1, Pages 239-40*
14. *CWSA 1, Pages 168-74*
15. *CWSA 1, Pages 266-70*
16. *CWSA 27, Pages 367-70*

Footnote:

1. *CWSA 1, Page 195*

CWSA : Collected Works of Sri Aurobindo

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