

OCCASIONAL PUBLICATION 79

IIC

India's Forgotten Heritage: Cultural  
Intermingling and Harmony in  
Sanskrit Literature

by  
A.N.D. Haksar



INDIA INTERNATIONAL CENTRE  
40, MAX MUELLER MARG, NEW DELHI-110 003  
TEL. : 24619431 FAX: 24627751

OCCASIONAL PUBLICATION 79



**India's Forgotten Heritage: Cultural  
Intermingling and Harmony in Sanskrit  
Literature**

**by  
A.N.D. Haksar**

The views expressed in this publication are solely those of the author and not of the India International Centre.

The Occasional Publication series is published for the India International Centre by Cmde. (Retd.) R. Datta.

Designed and produced by Dee Kay Printers, 5/37A Kirti Nagar Indl. Area, New Delhi-15, Tel.: 011-41425571, Email: dkprinter@gmail.com

## **India's Forgotten Heritage: Cultural Intermingling and Harmony in Sanskrit Literature\***

The laudable objectives of the India Harmony Foundation and some memorable words of its esteemed founder, the late Zafar Saifullah, provided an occasion for the thoughts presented here. The former include work for the 'oneness of spirit, national identity and brotherhood' to strengthen the country. The latter were '*Muhabbat ka mahaul banaa hai*' (building an ambience of amity). This is the context of this presentation.

The overall theme of India's Forgotten Heritage can cover a large number of subjects. That considered here is 'Cultural Intermingling and Harmony in Sanskrit Literature'. To some it may seem rather technical, incidental or even trivial. But it is worth some elaboration and attention at present.

This subject may also perhaps lead to some expectation of an authoritative exposition, based on deep professional research and knowledge. To preempt any such thinking, let it be clarified at the outset that the present writer is just an amateur of Sanskrit literature, still discovering its treasures through readings for pleasure, and sharing some of them through occasional translations. His words are thus limited to impressions formed in a personal search which still continues.

It is well-known that Sanskrit is an ancient language, with a long history and also a living tradition of usage which stretches to present times. Over the last 3,000 years or more, this has led to the growth in it of a vast, varied and very rich literature, reflecting a wide range of human thought and activity. The nature and contents of this immense literary cornucopia have also been much documented by modern scholarship. But they are not the central point of this survey.

The focus here is more on how Sanskrit literature has come to be perceived in popular understanding during the last couple of centuries leading to

---

\* This paper is based on a talk by A.N.D. Haksar at the India Harmony Foundation meeting on 2 November 2016 at the IIC.

*A.N.D. Haksar*

the present. It is in the background of this evolution that one looks here at the current common perception of this language, including of any cultural intermingling in its literature.

The overall perception of this language seems partly to have evolved along with modern Sanskrit studies following Western contacts with India from the 18th century onwards. Colonial scholarship sought to learn about India's early history through its ancient language. The course of these studies shows that they initially found focus in linguistics, history, religion and philosophy. Over time, such researches led to the growth of Indology, a new science to which Indian scholars also made valuable contributions as they became part of the modern academic process.

This new discipline seems to have initially concentrated on religion and philosophy. This can also be seen in the early English translations from Sanskrit. The very first was that of the *Bhagavad Gita* by the East India Company scholar Charles Wilkins, as early as 1784. The first Indian to translate from Sanskrit into English was Raja Ram Mohan Roy, whose rendition of *Isa Upanishad* appeared in 1816. While literary classics like Kalidasa's *Sakuntalam* were also translated in between and had a considerable impact in Europe, the main thrust seems to have remained on scriptural texts, exemplified by Max Mueller's 50-volume *Sacred Books of the East* series, that commenced publication during the 19th century.<sup>1</sup>

This has also contributed to the present perception of Sanskrit in common understanding. Traditionally also used in the liturgy, it is best known today as the language of religion and philosophy. In most cases, talk of it brings to mind the *Vedas* and other sacred texts or the rites they mention. The scriptural dimension is of course of utmost importance and also a literary treasure house on its own. But the focus on it has also tended to relegate other dimensions of this glorious literature into the shadows.

Like all great languages of the world, Sanskrit has its full share of literature other than the scriptural. This includes works creative and recurrent,

analytical and descriptive, critical and laudatory, lyrical and cynical, comic and erotic, heroic and down to earth, to mention only some of the categories. But many such writings have receded into the background and are much less known today.

Another common perception of Sanskrit, which predates but also influenced Indological studies, has been that of a refined and sophisticated language, ornate rather than simple, and tuned more to well-educated high class tastes somewhat distant from those of common people. The enduring fame of great literary works by famous authors like Kalidasa, Bana and Bhavabhuti further deepened this impression. It also intensified with the greater concentration of traditional learned critiques and commentaries on the elegant *kavya* or poetic literature of Sanskrit as against the *katha* or narrative works meant also for a wider audience. It would appear that modern scholarship has also been more attentive to *kavya* rather than *katha* literature.

A third common perception relates directly to the principal subject of this presentation. It is that of Sanskrit as a self-contained language and literature that developed mainly from its innate potential. Scholars believed that its grammatical form and literary traditions crystallised long ago, and this perhaps affected its interaction with cultural currents in other linguistic forms. Early Indological work may also have contributed to this view, as it was more drawn to ancient literature from the first millennium of the present era, with insufficient exploration of cultural interactions in that period.

A perception of exclusive self-sufficiency may thus have developed, despite the availability of corrective later evidence from the second millennium. The latter too includes a large variety of subjects, from pure literature to more technical works on medicine, jurisprudence, astronomy and other sciences which continued to figure in Sanskrit writing.

All these perceptions mentioned here together with their present limitations

are deserving of a two-fold comment. First, with continued scholarly research and translation studies, both abroad as well as in India, they are slowly changing to a wider perspective that includes more of literature other than scriptural and philosophic, that attuned to wider tastes, and that which manifests cultural intermingling. But secondly, the older perceptions outlined above are still common and current, and need further widening to reveal the full glory of Sanskrit literature.

One way to this further widening lies in bringing out other aspects of this literature from the shadows where they got consigned. This is perhaps best done through new translations which could bring them into the mainstream of modern reading. This needs looking beyond the ancient language's already well-known treasures to more coverage of other material. That could include thousand-year-old anthologies of epigrammatic verses on numerous topics, writings didactic and satirical, comic and erotic, earthy and colloquial. In other words, exposure to modern audiences of more works meant for the readers' or listeners' diversion and entertainment rather than edification.

This consideration has also propelled much of the present writer's own study and translations. At first, these were of popular animal fables and worldly stories, like *Hitopadesa* and *Dasa Kumara Charitam* or *Tales of the Ten Princes*. They then extended to satirical works like *Samaya Matrika* or *The Courtesan's Keeper*, and *Three Satires from Ancient Kashmir*, comic and erotic verse from the anthology *Subhashitavali*, as well as colloquial narratives like *Shuka Saptati* and the tale of Madhav and Kama. The last few of these are still comparatively little known. Eventually, in the course of this work were discovered some almost unknown Sanskrit texts that also manifest a delightful and remarkable intermingling of cultural traditions.<sup>2</sup>

One such work is titled *Suleiman Charitra* in the original Sanskrit. It was written 500 years ago by Kalyana Malla, who was from a noble warrior family in what is now modern Uttar Pradesh. Already a well-known writer, he was also the court poet of a prominent Afghan origin Lodhi prince. Some personal details of both prince and poet are also available, but this

work remained practically unknown for half a millennium. It still does not feature in standard academic text books and had never before been translated into any language.<sup>3</sup>

This highly readable work recounts in graceful Sanskrit verse a celebrated love-story of Judaic and Biblical origin, followed by a set of dramatic tales drawn from the *Arabian Nights*. These contents, little associated in current perception with India's ancient language, are presented in this book with the typical literary flair of idiom, setting and style in Sanskrit. They highlight at least four points worthy of note today.

The first point is that this work is a fine reminder of how Sanskrit writing flourished in the so-called medieval or Muslim period of Indian history. Second, its source material is from external origins, derived from the Jewish and Arabic world. Third, this material is presented here with the literary embellishments and additions particular to the world of Sanskrit, especially its *shringara* or erotic aspect unknown in the original sources. And finally, the two previous points reflect and exemplify a continual cultural intermingling in Sanskrit literature, which deserves greater recognition in present times.

The Biblical tale retold in *Suleiman Charitra* is the well-known love story of David and Bathsheba from the *Old Testament*. The story also had a resonance in Islamic literature where both David and his son Solomon are included in the Arabic digests of the lives of Muslim prophets. They are known there with their Quranic names of Dawood and Suleiman which were retained in the Sanskrit text. It further rendered the Hebrew name Bathsheba in Sanskrit as Saptasuta, both words signifying a seventh daughter in either language. It seems that the story had come to the Sanskrit poet through Persian and Arabic versions which now deserve further scholarly research and exploration.

The Sanskrit text describes in detail the beauty of Bathsheba and her love-making with David in an idiom the author draws from the much more ancient tradition of the *Kama Sutra*. It also has David commenting on death, and Bathsheba on chastity, in language which echoes Indian

A.N.D. Haksar

philosophy and traditional values. Without dwelling further on those features, here are two passages from the translation to give a flavour of the cultural intermingling in the original text.

First, the Sanskrit work's opening passage:

‘I bow to Vishnu, Shiva and Brahma,  
to Lakshmi, Gauri, Sarasvati,  
also to Ganesa, and indeed  
to Valmiki and Vyasa too.’

‘There was once a mighty lord of Ayodhya. In splendour and prowess he was like Balabhit, that is Indra, the king of the gods. No ruler could compare with him. Learned and knowledgeable, brave and devoted to public welfare, he was the famous King Ahmad, always kind and merciful, a bright jewel of the Lodhi line.

His son is called Lad Khan. A just and virtuous prince, attuned to both prudence and pleasure, and also marked by self-control. He has the great merits of nobility and profundity, of fortitude, valour and charm, among other qualities. In intellect he surpasses even Brihaspati, the guru of the gods, and in appearance, Manmatha, the god of love.’

Second, the subject of the work, and its actual commissioning:

‘Once this illustrious prince was seated in his assembly with scholars adept in many branches of learning... . On that occasion he addressed Kalyana Malla, the poet whose skill in the composition of verse had already earned him praise... “You are our court poet,” said Lad Khan .... “In the past you created a delightful work in the language of the gods....Now, in the same divine language, narrate the marvelous *Suleiman Charitra*, which is lauded by men of letters.... The wise and learned Suleiman was a great sage of the barbarian race at the end of the *Dvapara* and the beginning of the *Kali* era....He was the son of Dawood and was born from the womb of Saptasuta, like the moon

from the ocean. Write about his birth and life, and that of his august father"... Thus was Kalyana Malla commanded'.

These quotes would give the reader some idea of the cultural confluence seen in this Sanskrit work. But it is not the only one of this type. Another work of the same century, but from Kashmir and presently little known, is currently under this writer's translation. It is the *Delarama-Kathasara* by Rajanaka Bhatta Ahladaka. 'This tale was seen by me in Muslim scriptural dispensations', that poet says. 'It is composed in a way that is most brilliant. Here I have prepared it in the language of the gods for the diversion of all good people'. Yet another work is the *Sekha Subhodaya* of Halayudha from 16th century Bengal. It recounts the arrival there of a Muslim sage on the command of the Eternal Being and his encounters with the local king. These too are examples of synthesis in Sanskrit.<sup>4</sup>

From retellings, one may turn to translations as further examples of cultural intermingling. The earliest known is that of the *Panchatantra*, rendered from Sanskrit into Pahlavi or Middle Persian in the 6th century, into the Arabic *Kalilah wa Dimnah* in the 8th, and into the Persian *Anwar-i-Suhaili* in Mughal times. Alberuni, in his 11th century Arabic account of India, had reportedly quoted from the *Yoga Vasishtha*. But one may return to 13th century Bengal. There Ruknuddin Samarquandi translated into Arabic the *Amritakunda*, an ancient Sanskrit manual of *hatha yoga* practice. The translation, titled *Hauz al Hayat or Cistern of Life*, had a wide circulation and now exists in over 40 Arabic recensions, apart from those in Persian. A later translation on a similar theme, but from Persian into Sanskrit, was that of the 17th century work *Majma al Baharain* by the Mughal prince Dara Shikoh. Its Sanskrit version is titled *Samudra Sangama* or a meeting of the oceans. Both have been described by a noted French scholar as tables 'of concordance of Muslim and Hindu terms for a metaphysical lexicon'.<sup>5</sup>

The overall number of translations into Arabic and Persian from Sanskrit and vice versa is certainly much more than that so far documented. Scholars have catalogued at least five Persian renderings of the *Mahabharata*, the best known of which is the *Razmanama* commissioned by Akbar.

*A.N.D. Haksar*

Two Persian verse renditions of the *Ramayana* were done in the reign of Jahangir, and a third during that of Aurangzeb when some texts on music and fine arts were also translated. <sup>6</sup>

In the Mughal context, two popular writers are also worth mentioning for the cultural intermingling seen in more popular writings. One was the famed nobleman Abdurrahim Khan-e-Khanan, whose tomb, located in New Delhi near that of Humayun, is now being repaired. He wrote both in Persian and Sanskrit, as well as still quoted couplets in what was then probably known as Hindavi. Among the works attributed to him is the once popular astrological manual *Kheta Kautuka or Sport of the Planets*. It is composed in Sanskrit verse, but the planets are mentioned by their Persian names, and some of the predictions in Hindavi. Here is an example in English translation:

‘When Mushtari or Jupiter is  
in the Cancer sign or house of Wealth,  
when Chashmekhora, that is Venus,  
is in the tenth or second house,  
then, what can the astrologer write,  
the boy thus born, will be a king. ‘

Abdurrahim also composed verses in pure Sanskrit to popular Indian divinities. Here is a well known stanza to Shri Krishna:

‘What can I offer you  
O Lord of the Universe,  
whose palace is the ocean  
and housekeeper, goddess Padma?  
But you are without your mind  
which Radha did take away,

and mine I have to you submitted –  
please do accept it.’<sup>7</sup>

Another writer was the eminent Sankrit poet Jagannatha, who came from south India and found a place in the court of Shahjehan. His romantic poetry is still considered a classic. In one of his lighter verses, he pays homage to both his two masters, *Dillisvara*, Lord of Delhi, and *Jagadisvara*, Lord of the Universe, by either of whom his wishes can be fulfilled. In another, he recounts that his early years were spent under the blossoms which were the hands of the royal Beloved of Delhi. From the latter, in yet another popular stanza attributed to him, he seeks a pretty *yavana* girl at the imperial court. Here is its translation:

‘If the yavani with the butter soft body  
were to be for my bed obtained,  
this earth itself would I then think  
the best, not joys of paradise’<sup>8</sup>

Another example of cultural intermingling can be seen in Persian-Sanskrit dictionaries of that period. These include the 14th century *Parasi-nama-mala* of Salaksha, and the 16th century *Parasi-Prakasha* of Krishnadasa. That such interaction has continued can be seen in the 20th century Sanskrit-Persian Dictionary of Muhammad Riza Naini. In Arabic, a recent, perhaps the latest, translation of Sanskrit literature is the *Khazana al-Shair al-Sanskriti*, a 2011 rendition of the present writer’s ‘Treasury of Sanskrit Poetry’, compiled a decade earlier for the Indian Council for Cultural Relations.

In conclusion may be mentioned one way of making such interactions better known. It is also described in a quotation that is included in the Introduction to the translation of *Suleiman Charitra* already cited, and is part of perhaps the only serious academic comment so far on that little known text. This was made in the Boden Lecture of the Professor of Sanskrit at Oxford University ten years ago. In the words of that

distinguished scholar, 'there is much more literature in Sanskrit that was produced in the middle of the second millennium, in a setting of dialogue with the knowledgeable traditions expressed in Persian and Arabic'. He added that we might better be able to explore that literature 'if we were to adopt new scholarly assumptions based on a better grasp of historical realities'.

Thus, while there is considerable cultural intermingling in Sanskrit literature, much more of it can be brought into the mainstream of modern reading with further research, exploration and translation which deserve due encouragement through organisations like the Indian Harmony Foundation.

## References

1. A.B. Keith. 1961. *A History of Sanskrit Literature*. London: Oxford University Press; M.Winternitz. 1967. *History of Indian Literature*, vol. III, tr. Subhadra Jha. Delhi: Motilal Banarsidas; A.K.Warder.1996. *Indian Kavya Literature*, vols. I-III. Delhi: Motilal Banarsidas.
2. All listed in the biographical note on the author at the end.
3. As in 2 above.
4. Pandit Sivadatta and K.P. Parab (ed.) 1923. *Delarama Kathasara*. Bombay: Nirnaya Sagar Press. Also, *Seka Subhodaya* of Halayudha, 1963 (ed/tr), Sukumar Sen. Calcutta: The Asiatic Society.
5. As at 1 above. Also, Pathak, J. (ed.). 2005. *Majma al Bahrain*. Allahabad: Raka Prakashan; and Carl W. Ernst. June 2003. *Muslim Studies of Hinduism, Iranian Studies*, vol. 36, no.2.
6. Carl W. Ernst as at 5 above.
7. Chaudhuri, J.B. 1954. *Khan Khanan and Sanskrit Learning, Contribution of Muslims to Sanskrit Learning*, vol. II, Pracyavani. Calcutta.
8. M.P. Dwivedi (ed.) 1991. *Bhamini Vilasa* of Jagannatha. Bombay: Shri Venkateshvara Press.

### **About the Author**

A.N.D. Haksar is a well known translator of Sanskrit classics. A career diplomat for many years, he served as Indian High Commissioner in Kenya and the Seychelles, Minister in the United States, and as Ambassador in Portugal and Yugoslavia, among other posts. His translations from the Sanskrit include: *The Shattered Thigh*, *Tales of the Ten Princes*, *Hitopadesa*, *Simhasana Dvatrimsika*, *Subhashitavali*, *Kama Sutra*, *Three Satires from Ancient Kashmir*, *The Courtesan's Keeper*, *The Seduction of Shiva*, *Suleiman Charitra and Raghuvamsam*, all published as Penguin Classics; and also *Jatakamala* with Foreword by the Dalai Lama (Harper Collins), *Shuka Saptati* (Rupa & Co) and *Madhav & Kama* (Roli Books). He also compiled *A Treasury of Sanskrit Poetry* (ICCR), published in an Arabic translation as *Khazana al-Shair al-Sanskriti* in 2001 in UAE.









**The India International Centre was founded with a vision for India, and its place in the world: to initiate dialogue in a new climate of amity, understanding and the sharing of human values. It is a non-government institution, designed, in the words of its founder president, Dr. C.D. Deshmukh, to be a place where various currents of intellectual, political and economic thought could meet freely. 'In its objectives, the Centre declares its purpose as being that of society to 'promote understanding and amity between the different communities of the world by undertaking or supporting the study of their past and present cultures, by disseminating or exchanging knowledge thereof, and by providing such other facilities as would lead to their universal appreciation.'**

₹ 25  
for members