

CLASSICAL SANSKRIT LITERATURE

By the beginning of the early Christian centuries a form of Sanskrit known as classical Sanskrit took shape and started replacing Prakrit as the language of law, governance and literary and philosophical expressions. Sanskrit came to dominate for more than thousands years as the language of governance and law and came to be replaced by Persian only after the establishment of the Delhi sultanate. But even after that it continued as a part of elite literary, ritualistic and philosophical traditions in almost all

parts of the country amidst the growth of different regional languages. But it could never became the language of the masses like Prakrit and remained confined to the rulers and the educated.

The development of Sanskrit was facilitated by the early works on Sanskrit grammar such as 'Ashtadhyayi' of Panini (fourth century BC) and 'Mahabhashya' of Patanjali a commentary on the 'Ashtadhyayi' written in the second century BC. possibly during the reign of Pushyamita Shunga when the so called Brahmanism was reviving itself. An inscription belonging to the Shunga age (Ayodhya inscription of Dhandeva) is supposed to be the first inscription in Sanskrit. But the first long or major inscription in the Sanskrit is the inscription of Rudradaman (a Shaka ruler) found at Girnar in Junagarh (Saurashtra region of Gujrat) dated 150 AD.

The first major author of the classical Sanskrit was Ashvaghosha who belonged to the first century AD and lived in the court of Kanishka. The masterpiece of Ashvaghosha, is the 'Buddhacharita' which is regarded as the first biographical work in the subcontinent dealing with the life history of Buddha. He also wrote another epic named 'Saundrananda'.

Bhasa, whose time is not known but he certainly preceded Kalidasa in the fourth-fifth centuries AD —Kalidasa mentions him in his works— is regarded as the first dramatist if the Sanskrit. He is given credit for writing 13 plays based on the subjects derived from the Ramayana, the Mahabharata and popular tales. The most important work, and possibly the only surviving work attributed to him is the 'Svapnavasavdatta' based on the love story of Vasavadatta (the daughter of Chanda Pradyota) and Udayan (the king of Vatsa). Another important author was Sudraka c. third century AD who is known for his famous ten- act play the 'Mrichchhkatika' (a little clay cart) dealing with the love story of a poor Brahman Charudatta and a rich courtesan Vasantsena.

But the most famous poet and dramatist of the classical Sanskrit was Kalidasa, a resident of Ujjain, who is said to be one of the 'navratnas' (nine gems) living in the court of the most famous Gupta ruler Chandragupta II Vikramaditya. The name of Kalidasa is also mentioned—along with the name of another poet Bharvi ,the author of a famous epic Kiratarjuniya based on the Mahabharata—in the famous Aihole inscription of the Chalukya ruler Pulkeshin II composed by his court poet Ravikriti in Sanskrit. Some important works of Kalidas are mentioned below:—

1. Abhijnanshakuntalam: The most famous work (a drama) of Kalidasa is based on the theme of Gandharva marriage (a marriage without involving rituals) between king Dushyant and Shakuntala. The work was translated into English by the famous Orientalist Sir William Jones, the founder of the Asiatic Society of Bengal.
2. Malvikagnimitra: A drama based on the love story of Malvika and Agnimitra, a ruler of the Shunga dynasty. In this work we also find the reflection of Shunga- Satvahana conflict.
3. Vikromorvasiya: A drama on the theme of love between Chandragupata and the apsara Urvasi
4. Meghdootam: contains lyrics expressing love and the grief of Yaksha separated from Yakshini
5. Raghuvansham: An epic on the history of kings of the Ikshvaku family
6. Kumarsambhavam: An epic based on the marriage of Lord Shiva and Uma and the birth of Karttikeya
7. Ritusamhar: An epic celebrating the nature and the seasons which is supposed to be the earliest work of Kalidasa.

A contemporary of Kalidasa and possibly another gem in the court of Chandragupt II was Amarsimha who is given credit for 'Amarkosha' considered as the first dictionary of the Sanskrit language. The work is singularly important for historical reconstruction as it provides an explanation for the different terms and concepts associated with the time.

After the golden age of the classical Sanskrit represented by Kalidasa during the Gupta age, the most famous author was Banbhata, mainly a prose writer, who lived in the court of Harsha (first half of the seventh century AD). He wrote 'Harshcharita' glorifying King Harsha and the work is regarded as the first secular biographical work which set the tone for other biographies written later on. His another work 'Kadambari' narrates the love story of Chandrapid and Kadambari in their several births. His patron the Harsha too displayed literary potential and is given credit for three dramas: the 'Ratnavali', 'Priyadarshika' and Nagananda.

In the eighth century we find the famous Bhavabhuti, living in the court of Yashovarman of Kannauj, who has been mentioned even by Kalhana in his famous historical work the Rajatarangini. He wrote dramas such as 'Mahavircharita', 'Malmadhav', and 'Uttaramcharita'.

In the 12th century we find Jaydeva in Bengal who is supposed to be the last great poet of the classical Sanskrit. He lived in the court of the king Laxmansena and wrote the famous 'Gitagovinda' containing lyrics celebrating the legends associated with Krishna and Radha. The work is one of the earliest works associated with the Bhakti traditions which provides themes and subjects for other literary creations and artistic expressions.

Some other works and treatises

Natyashastra:

Attributed to Bharatmuni belonging to the early Christian centuries, the work is a treatise on performing arts like music, dance and drama.

Kamasutra:

A treatise on the art of love making and eroticism by Vatsayayan. The work is placed in the Gupta age and throws light mainly on the urban life (life of a Nagrak- a city dweller).

Arthshastra:

Attributed to the legendary Chanakya also known as Kautilya or Vishnugupta the work is a treatise on polity and state-craft. It's time is disputed but it is traditionally attributed to the Mauryan age.

Panchtantra:

Attributed to Vishnusharman it is a work on beast- fable (short stories containing some moral messages). It belongs to the early Christian centuries. The work has been translated in many foreign languages .

Hitopadesha:

Attributed to Narayan Pandita possibly in the 11 th century is another work on beast- fable.

Rajtarangini:

Written in 1148 AD during the reign of king Harsha of Kashmir by Kalhana , the work is regarded as the first historical work in which some canons of even modern history writing have been strictly observed. It deals with the history of Kashmir from the beginning to the time of its completion. Kalhana scrutinised his sources carefully to ascertain their authenticity and rejected those he thought to be dubious. He not only narrated the events but also tried to explain their causes and consequences. The work shows a clear sense of chronology which is an important ingredient of history writing.

However, his accounts related to remote past are shrouded in myths and legends and history becomes more clear mainly from the 8th century onwards. He tries to remain impartial but that does not stop him from passing some moral judgments and making some disparaging remarks against some persons and events. These tendencies erode the historical qualities of the work.