



Research Paper

Kalidasa's "Shakuntala" And Sir William Jones: An Analytical Study on The First English Translation

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ABSTRACT: Sir William Jones (1746-1794) was a scholar and an engaged man of languages, jurisprudence, literature and translations. Jones was the eloquent and significant personality closely connected with the leading figures of Britain, America and India during the American Revolutions and the initial period of British Raj. He was a man of languages and law. He mastered the languages, laws and literature of the major world civilizations. He studied and interpreted the culture of India through language study (Sanskrit). He translated the Laws of Manu (Manusmruti) and Kalidasa's "Shakuntala" into English. Jones adapted the literature and culture of India by writing himself. This research paper mainly aims to explore his activities as a first translator of the play "Shakuntala"- examining his attitude toward the Indian languages, literature, traditions and culture with genuine spirit. His translation of "Shakuntala" had enormous and grand effect. Such translations and works made him one of the greatest Orientalists and humanists of all time.

KEY WORDS: Sir William Jones, Shakuntala, Sanskrit, Translation, Kalidasa.

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I. INTRODUCTION

Sir William Jones (1746-1794) was a scholar and an engaged man of languages, jurisprudence, literature and translations. Jones was the eloquent and significant personality closely connected with the leading figures of Britain, America and India during the American Revolutions and the initial period of British Raj. He was a man of languages, translations, literature and law. He mastered the languages, laws and literature of the major world civilizations. He studied and interpreted the culture of India through language study (Sanskrit). He translated the Laws of Manu (Manusmruti), Kalidasa's "Shakuntala" and many other works into English. Jones adapted the literature and culture of India by writing himself. This research paper mainly aims to explore his activities as a first translator of the play "Shakuntala" and outcome of this first English translation of this great play - examining his attitude toward the Indian languages, literature, traditions and culture with genuine spirit. His translation of "Shakuntala" had enormous and grand effect. Such translations and works made him one of the greatest Orientalists and humanists of all time. Jones arrived in India in 1783 as a judge of supreme court of Calcutta. Soon after the arrival of Sir William Jones in India, he founded The Asiatic Society. The Asiatic Society of India was formed mainly with an objective to initiate and enlighten the oriental knowledge available in history, scriptures, or regional texts in India or Indian subcontinent. The British and Indian scholars were engaged in systematic and thorough study of different knowledge systems so that our tradition of research and dialogue may be established. Among these scholars Sir William Jones was a leading figure.

When Sir William Jones was in Europe he had heard about the Indian 'Natakas', known as Brahminical histories mixed with fables. Eventually, he came to know about these 'Natakas' were not merely histories because he had taken up the study of Sanskrit and the Brahmins became more familiar and comfortable with Sir William Jones instead of being reserved. Through his inquiries and search among the Brahmins of Calcutta, Sir William Jones found that 'Natakas' were not histories mixed with fables, but they were popular works consisted of conversations in prose and verse, held before ancient Rajas (Kings) in their public assemblies. He came on to conclusion that 'Natakas' were discourses on music and poetry but ultimately Pandit Radhakant (A very sensible Brahmin who had long been attentive to English manners) told Sir William Jones that the 'Natakas'

were like the English plays performed in Calcutta during the cold season. Sir William Jones asked for the best among them and in return he received- "Shakuntala".

It was certain that during the study of Sanskrit language, Sir William Jones would discover the great poet of India- Kalidasa. Sir William Jones was excited by the prospect of a forgotten dramatic literature. Sir William Jones procured diffuse, padded version of "Shakuntala" in Bengali recension after a quest for manuscript. This must have been sometime in August 1787 for we find him sending the story of the drama to Spencer on 4 September of the same year. (Mukherjee 104) This translation was not an easy work for Sir William Jones. Only the Brahmins had access to Sanskrit language and literature. And the Brahmin pandits of those days were not willing to teach the Sanskrit language to Sir William Jones because he was a foreigner, a 'mleccha' (impure). With the help of his teacher Ramlochan, a man of the Vaidya Caste, Sir William Jones started reading and it took almost two autumns to read and make a literal translation into Latin. When the reading was finished, he was more excited than he had been at any of his earlier literary discoveries. "Shakuntala" was a pleasing and authentic picture of Hindu manners, one of the most valuable discoveries of Oriental literature yet brought to light. His was not mere intellectual excitement. A keen judge of literature from his classical studies he knows that he had uncovered a single drama which would stand among the world's best, and a dramatist whom he titled the Indian Shakespeare. (Cannon 164)

Jones wanted to make this masterpiece available to English language readers. He strongly believed that "Shakuntala" deserved a place in world literature, not the ensconce by the Brahmins. He translated his Latin version into English during the Krishnagar vacation of 1789. This English translation was completed by October in 1789 and was published in Calcutta. "Shakuntala" was not the first Sanskrit work to be translated in European language. Abraham Roger and Charles Wilkins translated some of the major Sanskrit works before Sir William Jones. Charles Wilkins had already translated and published Bhagvad Geeta (1785) and Heetopadesa (1787). Abraham Roger had translated Bhartruhari's proverbs. These translations mainly intended to convey the Indian religious and secular ideas to Europe and not translated for their literary merit or aesthetics. Unlike them, Sir William Jones' perspective was different. To him Kalidasa could be judged by European standards and he was equal to Shakespeare, both as a dramatist and a poet. Sir William Jones was fascinated by the simplicity of Shakuntala and love of nature in the play but to him its greatness lies in its style and decorum. The translated drama was reprinted three times within seven years after its first publication in England. The drama was translated into German, French and Italian. Herder and Goethe much impressed with the play.

The translation of "Shakuntala" was received enthusiastically in Europe and was reviewed as a great contribution of India to world literature. Such excitement was aroused in Europe previously by Sir Richard Burton's translation of "The Arabian Nights", moreover, after the publication of Jones' translation of "Shakuntala", educated Indians came to realize that they too had a counterpart of Shakespeare nearly eleven centuries ago. Thus, Jones' translation of Kalidasa filled Indians with a sense of pride in their great and ancient culture that was almost ignored or looked down upon by the then foreign masters, the British rulers of India. Today we all must be grateful to Sir William Jones, the great Indologist and Orientalist for his contribution to the revival of ancient Indian literary heritage through his translation of Kalidasa's "Shakuntala".

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