

Methodology of Critically Editing Kālidāsa

With Special Reference to Existing Critical Editions

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The age-old Indian literary tradition noted for its versatility suffers from some physical limitations. Transmission of ideas, from the earliest time was dependent on the oral sound. Śruti, that is hearing, as is well known, was the sole method of dissemination of ideas from the teacher to the taught. The Vedas, the six ancillary sciences related to Śikṣā, Kalpa, Vyākaraṇa, Chandas, Jyotiṣa and Nirukta - were all committed to memory. The teacher spoke and the learners heard and memorised. Transformation of the oral sound into written characters, although practised, does not have a long record. Historians hold that none of the manuscripts of extant texts dates back beyond the tenth century. The practice of oral transmission, perishable nature of writing materials, such as birch-bark, cotton-cloth, wooden boards, palm-leaves, to name a few, and the problem of faithful copying by the transcriber have adversely affected almost all the manuscripts of the texts.

As a result even the works of the greatest of Sanskrit poets, Kālidāsa, suffer from inaccuracy and interpolations. No autograph texts are available. It is very difficult to say what actually were the words of the poet.

The problem has been very succinctly put by Dr. Katre thus : The chief province of Indian textual criticism deals in the main with copies of copies... the texts which have come down to us were copied for the most part, not on stone or other imperishable material, but on birch-bark, palm-leaf and paper; these had to be copied several times at different periods both by way of precaution against wear and tear as well as a means to satisfy the desire of other persons than the first possessor to become acquainted with their contents."

As the texts have come down to us, a manuscript is not usually a clean copy or a single piece of writing. It is very commonly found to contain alterations by eraser, additions or substitutions which are due either to the scribe or scribes of the manuscript, or to some other person or persons called the reviser or revisers."

These are the problems that an editor has to face in bringing out an edition of any Sanskrit text. Thus "Textual criticism has for its sole object the interpretation and controlling of the evidence contained within the manuscripts of a text or in documents so that we can reach as far back as possible and try to recover the authentic text or to determine as nearly as possible the words written by the author

himself... Such a restoration is what is known as a critical recension. The problem and purpose of critically editing a text, I hope have become clear from this introduction. I propose here to place before you the ideal methodology followed by a great Sanskritist long before serious attention was drawn to it. Iswar Chandra Vidyasagar, the renowned Principal of the Sanskrit College, Calcutta undertook the editing of *Meghadūta*, *Uttaracarita* and *Abhijñāna-Śākuntala* in 1869, 1872 and 1871 respectively. It will be interesting and enlightening to discuss his attitude to the work undertaken, as has been put forward by him in the introduction. I take up his introduction to the AS. His scientific attitude and methodology deserve the attention of all Sanskrit scholars. I translate portions of his observations in order to impress upon the enquiring mind the correct approach of a sincere and honest editor.

He says, inter alia, that some 32 years ago that is in 1839, this play was first published for the first time in India by Premchand Tarkavagisha, the retired professor of Sanskrit Poetics. After that a second edition was published in 1851 with the financial assistance rendered by E.B.Cowell, the then Principal. In 1853, new edition was published by Krishnanath Nyayapancanan.

In spite of these two excellent editions, the *raison de etre* for new edition, Vidyasagar observes, was to introduce the North-western recension of the text, which was prescribed as a text book for the B.A. classes in the Calcutta University. Both the earlier editions were based on the Bengal recension. As such he was bringing a new edition.

Vidyasagar then observes that the text based on North-west recension was published by Monier Williams of the Oxford University, along with explanations and notes in English in 1853. This was the best edition according to him.

Since this edition was not easily available, and fully satisfactory for the native students, he thought of bringing out a new edition.

The north-western recension was not easily available. So he followed the best way. He sought the assistance of a friend at Varanasi for providing the text, but could not get any. Then he personally went to Varanasi and happened to meet the father of Hindi prose, the well-known Bharatendu Harishchandra. This gentleman, says Vidyasagar, kindly lent him from his personal library: 3 texts, one commentary and 3 renderings of Prakrit portions. Then he got two more texts from the Sanskrit College, Varanasi through the Principal of the Calcutta Sanskrit College. His edition thus was based on these 5 texts of the original play, one commentary and 3 Sanskrit renderings of Prakrit.

Vidyasagar observes that in these total nine texts, there are variant readings at places. He has accepted the readings that appealed to him to be the best. But in each case the readings of all the texts have been provided in the bottom, so that the discerning reader can evaluate the comparative merit of the reading. Of the 3 texts provided by Babu Harishchandra - two are complete, one of them old, the other one new the readings of the newer text has been marked-I and the older-2, the third text is mutilated upto the middle - the reading of this have been marked 3. The two texts of Sanskrit College Varanasi are incomplete as the last portions are missing - these have been referred to in the footnotes under No. 4 and 5. (missing portion less-4-more-5). The readings according to the commentaries are noted at No. 6. Similarly nos 7, 8 and 9 refer to the reading according to the Sanskrit rendering of the Prakrit.

He further observes that he has followed the North-western recension thoroughly. Wherever readings have appeared irrelevant to him, he has used the reading of the Bengal recension only in such cases, as the only way out. At certain places readings that appeared to him as due to scribe's error, have been slightly changed. All such amendations have been shown separately.

From this, the correct approach and scientific methodology to be followed by an honest and sincere editor become very clear. The main purpose being to ascertain the correct reading as close as possible to the autograph, textual criticism starts with the Recension which is then followed by Emendation. The more the number of manuscripts the greater is the need of examining them. A comprehensive objective examination only can lead to right emendation.

The science of editing has made strides since the times of say Sir Monier Williams or Pischel. Sukhthankar, Edgerton, etc. have shown and explained the method to be followed in editing a definitive edition of such texts as the *Mahābhārata* and the *Pañcatantra* and evaluation of all the texts must be based on the successful utilisation of the evolved methodology.

I have long cherished the idea of some agency which would undertake the publication of standard text-books to be utilised compulsorily in the College and Universities all over the country. A body of scholars can sit together in groups to check all the available editions of text books relating to the Vedic studies, literature, philosophy and grammar. Those which would satisfy the editorial norms of critical editions only should be approved. If such a method of evaluating all existing texts is followed, the future generations will have the satisfaction of using the most authentic texts on all subjects.