



A history of Sanskrit literature

Arthur Berriedale Keith

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Taken in conjunction with my Sanskrit Drama, published in 1924, this work covers the field of Classical Sanskrit Literature, as opposed to the Vedic Literature, the epics, and the Puranas. To bring the subject-matter within the limits of a single volume has rendered it necessary to treat the scientific literature briefly, and to avoid discussions of its subject-matter which appertain rather to the historian of grammar, philosophy, law, medicine, astronomy, or mathematics, than to the literary historian. This mode of treatment has rendered it possible, for the first time in any treatise in English on Sanskrit Literature, to pay due attention to the literary qualities of the Kavya. Though it was to Englishmen, such as Sir William Jones and H. T. Colebrooke, that our earliest knowledge of Sanskrit poetry was due, no English poet shared Goethe's marvellous appreciation of the merits of works known to him only through the distorting medium of translations, and attention in England has usually been limited to the Vedic literature, as a source for comparative philology, the history of religion, or Indo-European antiquities; to the mysticism and monism of Sanskrit philosophy; and to the fables and fairy-tales in their relations to western parallels. The neglect of Sanskrit Kavya is doubtless natural. The great poets of India wrote for audiences of experts; they were masters of the learning of their day, long trained in the use of language, and they aim to please by subtlety, not simplicity of effect. They had at their disposal a singularly beautiful speech, and they commanded elaborate and most effective metres. Under these circumstances it was inevitable that their works should be difficult, but of those who on that score pass them by it may fairly be said *ardua dum metuunt amittunt vera viai*. It is in the great writers of Kavya along, headed by Kalidasa, that we find depth of feeling for life and nature matched with perfection of expression and rhythm. The Kavya literature includes some of the great poetry of the world, but it can never expect to attain wide popularity in the West, for it is essentially untranslatable. German poets like Ruckert can, indeed, base excellent work on Sanskrit originals, but the effects produced are achieved by wholly different means, while English efforts at verse translations fall invariably below a tolerable mediocrity, their diffuse tepidity contrasting painfully with the brilliant condensation of style, the elegance of metre, and the close adaptation of sound to sense of the originals. I have, therefore, as in my Sanskrit Drama, illustrated the merits of the poets by Sanskrit extracts, adding merely a literal English version, in which no note is taken of variations of text or renderings. To save space I have in the main dealt only with works earlier than A.D. 1200, though especially in the case of the scientific literature important books of later date are briefly noticed. This book was sent in completed for the press, in January 1926 but pressure of work at the University Press precluded printing until the summer of 1927, when it was deemed best, in order not to delay progress, to assign to this preface the notice of such new discoveries and theories of 1926 and 1927 as might have permanent interest.

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