Parvati
or Extreme Love

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BASED ON THE KUMARASAMBHAVA
BY KALIDASA

TALES AND LEGENDS OF INDIA
Volume 4

This series was started with the aim of providing the modern reader with a glimpse of the fascinating, but infinitely complex world of Indian sensibility. Today's mind is at times taken aback by the superimposition of different worlds in the old Indian stories. This characteristic is not the fruit of a laboured aestheticism, but is the sign of a mentality that always tries to describe terrestrial life not in outer terms, but in terms of what it hides. It is a mentality that sees the field of human action as always surrounded and influenced by other forces that one could qualify as cosmic in nature. For the Greek spirit the light of the sun is its natural atmosphere, but for the ancient Indian spirit the sun is a golden veil that hides wonders that it desires ardently to possess. Ours is not a scholarly venture but an attempt to suggest through certain stories, told in as living and simple a language as possible, a key to understanding the culture and genius of India.

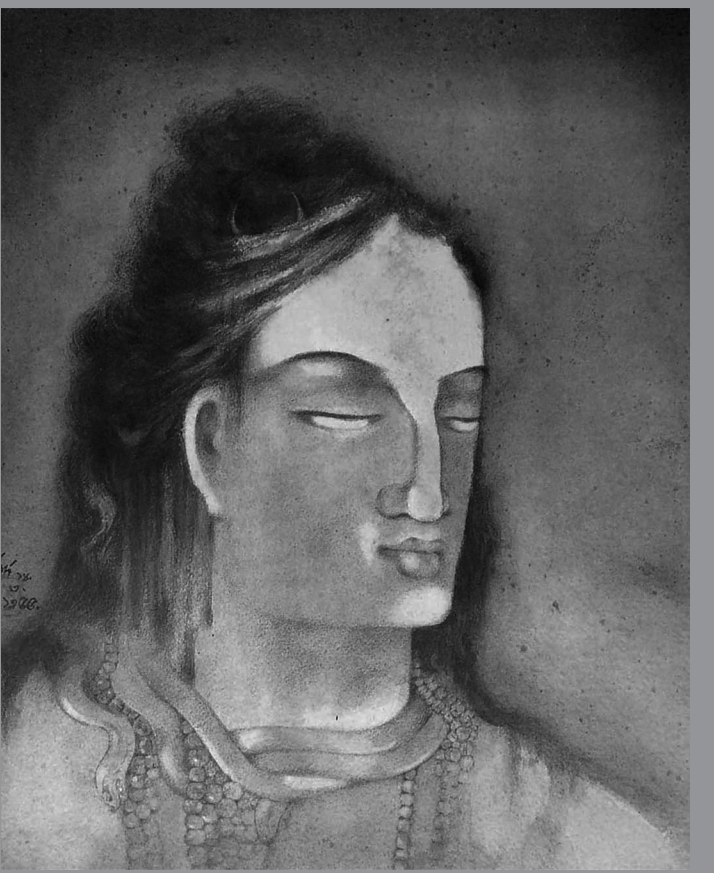
Publishers' Note

"The Hindu has been always decried as a dreamer and mystic", writes Sri Aurobindo. "There is truth in the charge but also a singular inaccuracy. The Hindu mind, in one sense, is the most concrete in the world. It seeks after abstraction, yet is it never satisfied so long as it remains abstraction. ... [The Hindu] is passionate for the infinite, the unseen, the spiritual, but he will not rest satisfied with conceiving them, he insists on mapping the infinite, on seeing the unseen, on visualising the spiritual."

Thus, in this detailed "map", each Hindu divinity incarnates a great spiritual principle or power, gives concrete form to a truth of the spirit. It seems to us that becoming familiar with these gods through a retelling of their tales could teach us more about Indian culture than many an abstract study of Hinduism. We therefore invite the reader to discover here one of the great myths of India: the eternal story of that eternal Being half-male and half-female, whose two names are Shiva and Parvati.

And to awake him from his boundless trance
Took woman's form the beauty of the world

— Sri Aurobindo



Shiva, a painting by Bengali artist Nandalal Bose (1882-1966)

Foreword

It has been said that it is in the Indian temperament to pursue each search it undertakes to its furthest extreme and to explore its ultimate possibilities. If there is one work that strikingly illustrates the truth of this observation, it is indeed the *Kumarasambhava* of Kalidasa. We find side by side therein the extremes of renunciation and surrender to pleasure. Only the Indian genius with its innate taste for the pursuit of the most opposite extremes could have produced such a masterpiece.

Kumara-sambhava: *The Birth of Kumara*, such is the title of the poem of Kalidasa, the renowned poet. Its subject is the marriage of Shiva and Parvati, a marriage willed and arranged by the Gods for from their union a son, a warrior god, who will enable the forces of light to triumph, will be born.

Shiva is the ascetic God, the yogi lost in contemplation, indifferent to pain and desire. He is the Lord of concentration. He is the immobile and silent one, the witness or *purusha*. But when he allies himself with his opposite, with the dynamic principle, when he unites with that which acts – the nature or *prakriti* – then he creates. Through his passion, his dance, his concentration, he creates. Shiva represents the Eternal's aspect of force. He alone can contain the cataracts of the Ganges in the coils of his hair. Only his throat can bear the burning of the poison that contains all the suffering and horror of the world. Parvati is his other half, his wife since the beginnings of time, She without whom he would remain eternally unmanifest, She whose arms must enfold him to keep him on earth. If this story has been called the supreme fable it is because it recounts the creation of the world. From the union of the supreme soul and nature in evolution, the world is created.

But these great Indian legends also have an esoteric significance and the path that Parvati has to take to reach Shiva symbolises the adventure of the soul in its search for realisation. Shiva is called God

but he can as well be called the perfection of happiness or immortality. Parvati is that in us which desires, struggles, seeks, suffers, loves. It is the woman but it is also the man, and the stone, and the bird in the tree and the passing cloud and the weeping child. And here the great paradox is that Parvati, who has been the wife of Shiva for all eternity, must once again seduce him in this life, once more awaken his love. It is a story that repeats itself indefinitely. Parvati must unendingly conquer the supreme soul, she must forget everything which is not Shiva and blindly concentrate on this single goal; for the only way to win the heart of the great ascetic, he who is *a-roopa-haarya*, he who cannot be vanquished by beauty, is through extreme *tapasya*.

The word tapasya derives from the Sanskrit root *tap*, to warm, and is sometimes translated quite incorrectly as "penance". In fact it involves nothing less than a relentless effort focused on a specific result — a gathering of all the human faculties on a single point, a harnessing of all the thoughts, emotions, and physical habits of the being, a concentration of the will with a view to acquiring or becoming something. Not only does one "burn",

but consciously and methodically one seeks to burn more and more integrally until there is nothing left inside but fire – that is, energy. Such was the great notion of ancient India. It is likewise true that with the passage of time a certain deformation came into play and the word tapasya was mostly used to designate ascetic practises having this aim. Moreover, given the aforementioned Indian tendency of carrying each line of experience to its farthest limits, aware that only a "fine excess" can break the inertia of the ordinary man, innumerable are those who have sought the Eternal through physical austerities. Nonetheless this should not make us lose sight of the original meaning of the word tapasya, the sense of intense concentration fusing all the parts of the being and awakening a force so powerful that it can humble even the gods.

A fundamental myth of Hindu cosmogony and an initiatic tale retracing the trials and struggles of the soul's journey towards its own fulfilment, the *Kumarasambhava* is all that and yet much more. What we have here is without a doubt the greatest work of classical Sanskrit. Epic in scope, romantic in approach, classical in form, it cannot be

pigeon-holed into any of the categories familiar to European literature. Indian critics rank it amongst the *mahakavyas*, the "great" or epic poems.

One criterion of this genre is that its main characters must be gods, heroes or descendants of royal lineage. But Kalidasa's genius lies in maintaining their marvelous, strange and sublime character whilst giving them human thoughts, words and passions. Nevertheless, unlike Homer's protagonists and cast of characters, these gods or demigods lose nothing of their divinity by being brought down to our plane of experience and even when they are described with a mild touch of humour, there is never any trace of skepticism or lack of respect. They are simultaneously cosmic forces and terrestrial creatures. Their traditional and symbolic attributes are present but are transformed by the poet into romantic elements which are part of their personal charm or indicative of a certain psychological state. If Indra is at a certain moment described as holding a "lightning bolt with chipped edges" it is that the king of the gods suffered a bruising defeat and is standing in front of Brahma as a living image of desolation. These celestial beings are

not foreign to us, they could be our brothers, but brothers belonging to a more refined, conscious, harmonious world than ours, a world where even sadness has its charm.

For Kalidasa's universe is a paradise of beauty, a paradise that belongs neither to this world nor to another: all the gods, men, animals, mountains and valleys that inhabit it are creatures of the poet's making. To all he lends elegance, grace and kindness. In this world of innocence all is purified by beauty. Even the lion's claws covered with the blood of an elephant are charming. Even the rocks and flowers are conscious and friendly beings. Even suffering loses its bitter taste and turns into a delicious ecstasy. This is what explains, says Sri Aurobindo, the attraction the people of India have always felt towards Kalidasa.

"After reading a poem of his the world and life and our fellow creatures, human, animal or inanimate have become suddenly more beautiful and dear to us than they were before … the vain cloud and the senseless mountain are no longer senseless or empty, but friendly intelligences that have a voice to our souls. Our own common thoughts,

feelings and passions have also become suddenly fair to us; they have received the sanction of beauty. And then through the passion of delight and the sense of life and of love in all beautiful objects we reach to the Mighty Spirit behind them whom our soul recognizes no longer as an object of knowledge or of worship but as her lover, to whom she must fly, leaving her husband the material life and braving the jeers and reprobation of the world for His sake." Thus by a singular paradox, "we reach God through the senses".

The subject of the poem is an illustration of this quest. Parvati's love is in fact a very sensual passion but the fact that it has as its object Shiva, the eternal being, gives to it a strange charm that partakes of both the body and the spirit. Thus, for example, Shiva's well-known attributes, — his blue throat, his crescent moon, and his third eye, — that are part of a symbolic language belonging to the discourse of myth or religion, here are evoked as sensual objects that Parvati desires to see, touch and caress. As we have seen, we are not far from an ulterior stage of the development of Indian culture, when the relation between the human soul and the

supreme god will be seen and felt as a woman's passion for her lover. In this approach known as *bhakti*, love will become the principal lever in the spiritual quest.

Even though the *Kumarasambhava* contains seventeen cantos, the majority of critics agree that only the first eight cantos are the work of Kalidasa. Thus the poem that we present here remains unfinished and one will not find the expected conclusion, that is, the famous birth of Kumara. At the end of the book we have added a short summary of the last nine cantos. But the reader should not experience the frustration natural to the person who feels that the "end of the story" has been snatched away from him. In fact the technique or art of Kalidasa, as of all the great Sanskrit poets, lies in proceeding from *sloka* to *sloka*. A sloka is a verse composed of four parts. The great poet Sri Aurobindo has the following to say about the art of the sloka, "Each sloka is expected to be a work of perfect art in itself, a harmonious, vivid and convincing expression of an object, scene, detail, thought, sentiment, state of mind or emotion that can stand by itself as an independent figure; the succession of slokas must be a

constant development by addition of completeness to completeness and the whole poem or canto of a long poem an artistic and satisfying structure in this manner, the succession of cantos a progression of definite movements building a total harmony. It is this carefully artistic and highly cultured type of poetic creation that reached its acme of perfection in the poetry of Kalidasa." Despite the absence of the last cantos, the poem of Kalidasa is thus complete in itself.

One must finally say a few words about the language of Kalidasa — its succinctness, compact but never abrupt, "precise to the farthest limit of precision", its sobriety coupled with opulence, abundance, and majesty. It is both noble and ancient and yet knows how to be simple and direct, and if we weren't dealing with a poet who lived around the beginning of our era, one could say incredibly modern. The antipodes of asceticism and sensuality are, as we have pointed out, at the heart of the poem but its style is anything but extreme. Rather it combines "the minimum of word expenditure with the fullest sense of an accomplished ease and a divine elegance and, not excluding a fine excess that

is not excessive, an utmost possible refined opulence of aesthetic value." And Kalidasa's sovereign mastery of rhythm is as great as his sovereign mastery of phrase. No less than eight different metres are used in the *Kumarasambhava*, and each canto is composed in a specific metre, with a change in the final stanza or the last two stanzas. Sanskrit prosody being based not only on the number of syllables, but also on their quantity and order (somewhat like Latin verse), is a varied and magnificent structure which has scant tolerance for the slightest negligence, and appears in all its splendour when recited, because each metre corresponds to a different melody.

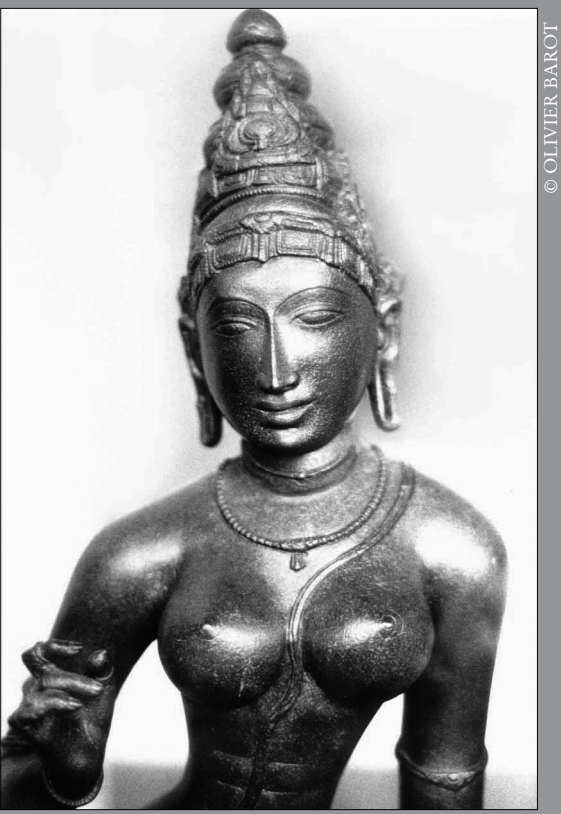
In the text presented here, which is a cross between a translation and an adaptation, we have tried to tone down those allusions, mythological or otherwise, that are too obscure for the modern reader, whilst respecting the amplitude of the vision and the emotional content of the images. We have omitted the fourth canto, devoted to the lamentations of Rati, the companion of Desire, as many of the passages would have necessitated a too detailed commentary and explanation.

In the fourteenth century, the great commentator on Kalidasa, Mallinatha, at the beginning of his analysis of the *Kumarasambhava* observed that the muse of Kalidasa had fainted under the weight of "bad commentaries". Today he would have probably added "poor translations" as well. One can only hope that our text will not add to the burden already borne by the gracious muse of Kalidasa, before whom we bow for a moment before commencing our narration:

अस्त्युत्तरस्यां दिशि...

Astyuttarasyaam dishi

There is, in the regions of the North…



Parvati, bronze, Tanjavur

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The Child of the Rock

In the regions of the North there is a god, clothed by the snow-covered summits. He is the Lord of the Rock, the sovereign of all things immobile. A giant pivot sunk deep between the two oceans, his name is Himalaya.

Majestic as a king being fanned, yaks swish the air in front of Him with their tails, their circular movement sending showers of beams white like the moon scattering everywhere.

The sun raises its rays towards Him stretching them as far as possible, straining to reach his ice-bound lakes and make bloom there the lotuses that the stars have not yet plucked.

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