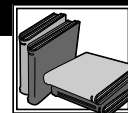


Chapter 4**Biography Activity**

What Shakespeare is to later writers of English poetry and drama, Kalidasa is to the literature of classical India (textbook page 86). He was not only the greatest writer in Sanskrit but one of the greatest in all world literature. Despite his importance, Kalidasa himself remains a mysterious figure. ♦ *As you read, think about how a writer's work reflects his or her background. Then, on a separate sheet of paper, answer the questions that follow.*

Kalidasa (c. A.D. 400?)

In spite of Kalidasa's importance as a writer, nearly all we know about his personal life is based on legends and on educated guesswork. Many authors leave clues about themselves in their work, but Kalidasa hid his personality very well.

Scholars even disagree about when Kalidasa lived and wrote. Some believe it was as long ago as the first or second century B.C. Many, though, think that the plays and poems reflect the life and style of the great Gupta empire, and that Kalidasa probably lived at the court of the emperor Chandragupta II, about the year A.D. 400. More than 1500 years later, his plays and poetry are still popular.

Kalidasa "introduces" himself to readers in the prologues to his plays—the only way we know his name. Like the names of other writers in Sanskrit, it is a sort of pen name, meaning "servant of Time [Kali]."

There are seven known works by Kalidasa. As epic poems (such as the *Ramayana*) were a tradition in classical Indian literature, Kalidasa followed this tradition. His epic *Raghu's Dynasty* (*Raghuvamsa*) is about a warrior-king. Of his three plays, the most famous is *Shakuntala* (a shortening of its full title, "The Recognition of Shakuntala"). Two long lyric poems are *The Cloud Messenger* (*Meghaduta*) and *The Gathering of the Seasons* (*Ritusamhara*).

In *The Cloud Messenger*, a dark-blue rain cloud travels many miles over the countryside to be a link between lovers who are far apart. As the cloud travels, the poet imagines its journey, the storms it brings, and the scenes it sees. According to one tradition, Kalidasa wrote the poem while he was on a long diplomatic embassy for the emperor, missing his wife and his home.

Kalidasa's writing reflects the splendor of imperial court life, but he also describes the natural world in vivid detail. Here the hero of *The Cloud Messenger* tells the cloud about its final destination, his home:

"By its edge is a miniature hill, wondrous, with sapphire-inlaid crest, exquisitely blue and ringed round by golden plantain-trees."

There may be some clues about Kalidasa's life in his writing. For instance, in several places he writes proudly about the palaces and gardens of the ancient capital city of Ujjayini (modern-day Ujjain, in Madhya Pradesh). This city was most likely his home. His poems also clearly describe several regions of India, such as the landscape of the Vindhya Mountains.

Kalidasa's poetry was first translated from Sanskrit in the 1700s. Since then, his style and originality have inspired later writers in both India and Europe.

“More than 1500 years later, his plays are still popular.”

Questions to Think About

1. When and where do most scholars think that Kalidasa lived and worked?
2. In what language did Kalidasa write?
3. What kind of literary work is *The Cloud*

- Messenger*? What is it about?
4. **Formulating Questions** What kinds of clues about Kalidasa's life have people found in his writing?