MARXISM AND CLASSICAL SANSKRIT LITERATURE: D. D. KOSAMBI’S APPROACH AND ASSESSMENT*

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In this essay I examine D. D. Kosambi’s approach and assessment of classical Sanskrit literature from the Marxist point of view. In the first part, I discuss S. N. Dasgupta’s critique of the Marxist approach to art and literature, arguing that Dasgupta had an idealist (and idealized) view of Indian society that does not match historical reality. I then contrast Dasgupta’s views with those of Kosambi. The latter asserted that there was no qualitative change in the means of production and hence in the relations of production in India before the imposition of British rule. In his view, classical Sanskrit literature too reflects this ground reality. In the second part, I discuss how Kosambi’s Marxist approach to art and literature was both aesthetic and historical. Through presenting Kosambi’s appreciation of classical Sanskrit literature, I show that Daniel H. H. Ingalls misapprehended Kosambi’s views and that his criticism of Kosambi was misdirected accordingly.

INTRODUCTION

SURENDRA NĀTH DASGUPTA, a versatile scholar and renowned historian of Indian philosophy, once observed (Dasgupta 1975b: xciv):

Marx has said that division of the social classes has always been the result of conflict between the capitalists and the working classes and that the development of social culture, the production of literature, philosophy, music and the like, is the result of the change in economic conditions and means of production.

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Dasgupta was not an ignoramus; he had read at least some basic works of Marx and had more than a nodding acquaintance with Marx’s thoughts gathered from secondary sources, see Dasgupta (1944). Nevertheless, it appears that Dasgupta’s understanding of Marx was hopelessly wrong. He takes “the capitalist” to be a category existing even in the precapitalist socio-economic formations. Similarly, slaves, serfs, and modern industrial proletariat are all lumped together quite unhistorically in the category of “the working classes”. Second, he considers the “development of social culture” to be the result of change in economic conditions and means of production. Development, it should be pointed out, is not synonymous with change. Things can develop along the same line without any change of a fundamental nature occurring in them. Development is quantitative; change, qualitative.1

Failing to comprehend this fundamental distinction Dasgupta (1975b: xxi; cf. De 1975: 19–20) smugly declares:

But both these theses seem to lose their force in the case of India. Here we have the development of philosophy, art and literature though there has practically been no change in the means of economic production for more than 2000 years.

Dasgupta confirms rather than refutes Marx’s view by mentioning the unchanging nature of classical Indian philosophy, art and literature.2 Since there was no change in the means of production (base) there could not be, as there was not, any change in the superstructure. Marx never denied the internal mechanism of development in the arts within the same social system. He pointed out that the sphere of arts shows the appearance and disappearance of certain genres (such as epic) that invariably follow the changes in the means of production, otherwise not (see Marx & Engels 1976: 82–84). He simply highlighted the obvious relations between the entire sphere of art and the general development of society (see Marx & Engels 1976: 82). Dasgupta fails to grasp the two fundamental aspects of the Marxist view of history: (a) the dependence of the ideological superstructure on the economic base can be established only “in the ultimate instance”; otherwise in spe-

1. See Rosenthal & Yudin (1962), s. v. “change” and “development”.
2. See Marx & Engels (1960: 76). Marx was merely echoing Hegel. For a detailed discussion, see Habib (2002: 16ff). Not that all Indian Marxists have endorsed Marx’s view. Kosambi boldly contradicts it (1975/1956, 11–12). Wielenga has summarized (1976: 51–64, 82–90) the debate on the so-called Asiatic mode of production.
cific cases there is always some room for relative autonomy of the arts, and (b) change in the base will lead to a change in the superstructure “more or less rapidly”, not immediately. Marx noted (see Marx & Engels 1976: 41–42) the necessary corresponding changes in the superstructure that followed the change in the base, inevitably (though not happening concurrently). He did not relate the development in this or that area of the superstructure with the radical change in the base.

**Dasgupta’s idealist (and idealized) view of Indian society**

Dasgupta was more interested in portraying a rosy picture of classical India than being true to facts. He waxed eloquent on the glory of the Brahmins (Dasgupta 1975b: xciv):

> The Brahmins had a position which was even greater than that of a king, not to speak of a Vaiśya capitalist [!], and yet there was no theocracy in India like the Papal domination of the West or like the system of the Caliphs in Islam. The Brahmins were poor and self-abnegating persons who generally dedicated their lives to learning and teaching and to the practice of religious works.

A Vaiśya in the precapitalist society was a trader or a merchant, not the owner of the means of production of the artisans and peasants, whose products he bought and sold at a premium. But even a Vaiśya “could be evicted at will” or “oppressed at will”, while the Śūdra could be “killed at will” (*Aitareya Brāhmaṇa* 5.7.29/35.3). Any comparison of the Vaiśya to the modern bourgeoisie is, to say the least, ridiculous.

Dasgupta also very conveniently forgets that all Brahmins of the past were not poor. Yājñavalkya, the famous Upaniṣadic seer, was a man of property. He had received hundreds of cows and many pieces of gold from king Janaka — so much so that he had to ponder a lot before deciding in favour of renunciation. The moot problem was how to settle his property on his two wives.³ Even earlier we read of such Brahmins as Ajigarta, a father who was not averse to selling his son in exchange of a hundred cows and even to slaughter him if the pay was another hundred (*Aitareya Brāhmaṇa* 3.7.16/33.3). Self-abnegation is not a virtue that can be associated with opulent seers of the Brāhmaṇas and Upaniṣads. Of course we know of both poor

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³. *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad* 2.4, 4.5. For an approximate calculation of Yājñavalkya’s personal property in cattle and gold, see Chattopadhyaya (1978: 255–56).
and rich Brahmins from classical Sanskrit literature. Think of Cārudatta, the impoverished Brahmin merchant in the plays of Bhāsa and Śūdraka. Think also of the jātivrajyā verses in Vidyākara’s anthology. None of these people were engaged, or afford to be engaged, in “learning and teaching” though they had to practise “religious works” even in their hardest times.

Quite oblivious of all this, Dasgupta (1975b: xcv) goes on to say:

The king and the Brahmin were the trustees of society, the king by protecting and enforcing the laws of dharma and the Brahmin by promulgating them.

Here too Dasgupta indulges in wishful thinking. The Upaniṣads show some kings to be both rulers of the land and masters of philosophy: the Brahmins have to go to them and pray for some nuggets of wisdom. The kings also gambolled in metaphysical fancy, for it might endow them with immortality (see Chattopadhyaya 1978: 252). The king and the privileged Brahmin lived in symbiosis, the one helping the other. The law books (Smṛtis) allow them to exploit both the vaiśya and the śūdra. The law-makers display the most despicable attitude: a śūdra will be punished hardest for committing a crime while a brahmin, guilty of the same charge, will be punished less or even go scot-free. A brahmin will never be subject to capital punishment howsoever culpable a sinner he may be. Plays like the Minister Rākṣasa and His Signet Ring (Mudrārākṣasa) and the Little Clay Cart (Mṛcchakaṭika) depict intrigues in the court, brahmins acting as ministers with antagonistic interests, autocratic rule, people’s revolt and the existence of widespread corruption, involving nepotism and caste discrimination. Kālidāsa’s Recognition of Śakuntalā (Abhijñānaśakuntalā) portrays the police commissioner and his assistants extorting bribes even from a poor fisherman (see R. Bhattacharya 1997–1998). In spite of all such telltale evidence, Dasgupta prefers to turn a blind eye to what Indian society was actually like, presumably in order to keep up the unrealistic and highly idealized image of India he nourished in his mind.

Ray’s view on the decline of science in India

The history of science in India provides a sad but glaring example of what harm this kṣatriya — brahmin axis did. This axis was not interested in in-

novation of any sort, least of all in the field of technology. Manual labour was progressively looked down upon. Physicians and more especially surgeons were ostracized. Even in the world of mythology, the Aśvins, the duo of divine physicians, were condemned by other gods for being “unholy”, since they moved among mere human beings (Chattopadhyaya 1977: 244). Praphulla Chandra Ray (1903: 1, 192–97) has squarely blamed Manu, the law-maker, and Śaṅkara, the absolute idealist philosopher, for the decline of surgery in India. The caste system and the peculiar view of denying the reality of the world as māyā (illusion) proved detrimental to the development of the art of healing, not to speak of any radical change in approach.

It will be absurd to say that Dasgupta was not aware of all this. He was well conversant with Ray’s History of Hindu Chemistry (see Dasgupta 1975a: i, 253–254). Yet in his determination to prove that Marxism (as he understood it) does not apply to India, he decided to ignore all facts that are as evident as daylight.

What I want to illustrate by citing and controverting the views of Dasgupta is the common misunderstanding prevailing among scholars, not to speak of students and laymen, regarding Marx’s view of history. Pundits like Dasgupta try to make Marx deny what he never denied. Marx did deny that the arts of any epoch (even the best specimens) could be totally independent of the economic formation of their times. Dasgupta and De too admit that the development of ancient Indian philosophy, art and literature remained confined to the same groove, speaking ad nauseam of smoke and fire, the jar and the cloth (ghaṭa and paṭa). Literary criticism also expatiated endlessly on rasa, rīti, and dhvani.6 This is but a mere reflection of the very slow quantitative development (and hence no qualitative change) in the economic base of the society. Once the precapitalist mode of production that had continued for more than two millennia was forcibly transformed following the advent of the British rule, the study of philosophy, and the practice of art and literature also underwent a sea change. So long as the precapitalist social formation, however tottering, held its ground in India, no departure was possible in the domain of thought and creation. Earlier foreign invasions and subsequent settlements by the Greeks, or the Pathans and the Mughals in later times, did not substantially affect the existing mode of production in India. Therefore, instead of any new line of thinking, we had the rehash of the same systems of philosophy, orthodox and heterodox, and recurrence of the same themes and styles continuing

with minor variations in art and literature. The situation is comparable to that of European philosophy, art and literature in the Middle Ages in Europe. With the gradual degeneration of the old Indian society, art and literature too became more ornate and less vibrant. Even though vernacular literature came to replace Sanskrit from the fifteenth century or so, the subject matter remained unaltered. Philosophers too were preoccupied in mere hairsplitting (just think of the Navya Nyāya system of logic).

Significance of the British Rule in India

Why did Indian literature as a whole continue to follow the same old models till the beginning of the nineteenth century? The answer is to be sought in the nature of the British conquerors. They were different from the earlier invaders in one important respect: they represented a new class, the bourgeoisie, which thrived on new technology. The word, manufacture, originally meant something made by hand, but in the new era it acquired an additional meaning: make (something) on a large scale using machinery. This change in the means of production brought the concomitant change in Indian literature and made it give up the earlier genres.

D. D. Kosambi (1957: lviii–lix), a Marxist polymath, provides an answer. He writes:

[N]ew types of literature cannot be expected without the rise of new classes […]. In India the new literature had to await the passage of centuries, till the great social novels in Bengal with Bankim Chandra Chatterji, matched by those of Rabindranāth Tagore whose incomparable poetry speaks of completely new social aspirations. The social drama in Marathi hardly antedates the First World War. I am not qualified to speak in detail of contemporary literature, but it will be admitted that these rigorous manifestations had been preceded by centuries of dreary classical imitation, even in the vernaculars. Foreign conquests explains nothing. For where is the corresponding influence of Persian, though that had become a court language all over the country, to be cultivated by learned Hindus? The Fīsāna Ajāyab and Bāgh-o-Bahār might as well have been written at the time of the Arabian Nights.

Kosambi then sums up his observation as follows (1957: lix): “The difference is that the British introduced a fundamentally new advanced mode of life, the bourgeois, as against Muslim feudalism which had meant a comparatively trifling readjustment of the way in which people lived”.

Kosambi’s Approach

The dual yardstick of the Marxist view on art and literature

How do the Marxists view art and literature? They follow Engels’s lead in this matter. Speaking of Goethe, Engels said: “We criticise him not from a moral or from a Party point of view, but at the very most from the aesthetic and historical point of view; we measure Goethe neither by moral nor by political, nor by ‘human’ standards” (Marx & Engels 1976: 356).

Similarly, Engels wrote to Ferdinand Lassalle in connection with the latter’s play, Franz von Sickingen: “You see that I make very high, that is to say, the very highest demands on your work both from the aesthetic and historical points of view […]” (Marx & Engels 1976: 107).

What does this dual yardstick, both aesthetic and historical, signify? The best example of its application is found in Kosambi’s assessment of classical Sanskrit literature.

Why choose Kosambi? The answer is that, though a student and professor of mathematics throughout his life, he was not an interloper in the field of Indology. His critical editions of Bhartṛhari’s 300 epigrams (Śatakatraya) and a twelfth-century anthology of classical Sanskrit epigrams (Subhāṣitaratnakoṣa) won unqualified approval from Sanskritists all over the world. These works necessitated several years of back-breaking labour in acquiring manuscripts, collating them and settling the reading of hundreds of verses. He was also a co-translator of Bhāsa’s play, Avimāraka with J. L. Masson. His two books on Indian history have been highly influential, although they are in many respects controversial (see Kosambi 1975/1956 and 1972/1965). Kosambi (1986: 9) could rightly boast:

My judgment of the class character of Sanskrit literature has not become less harsh, but I can at least claim to have rescued over fifty poets from the total oblivion to which lovers of Sanskrit had consigned them, not to speak of adding to our meagre knowledge of many others.

Kosambi was very critical of the continuation of Sanskrit in India even after the rise of local vernaculars. His overall view of Sanskrit literature was anything but complimentary. He (1975/1956: 283) declared quite unambiguously:

At its best, Sanskrit literature is exquisite, with an intricate pattern of beauty. Even at its best, it does not give the depth, simplicity of expression, the grandeur of spirit, the real greatness of humanity that one finds in the
Yet Kosambi does not hesitate to speak in superlative terms when it comes to individual authors of genius who enriched classical Sanskrit literature. Aśvaghoṣa, the first-century Buddhist poet-dramatist, is to him the “first great name worthy of mention” (Kosambi 1975/1956: 287). Bhāsa’s plays are prized, for he was “a poet-dramatist greatly admired even by Kalidāsa” (Kosambi 1975/1956: 288; the quotations that follow are from the same page). Bhāsa’s Cārudatta in Poverty (Daridracārudatta), Kosambi notes, “is closely copied by the first four acts of Śūdraka’s play”, the Little Clay Cart. Another play by Bhāsa, The Dream of Vāsavadattā (Svapnavāsavadattā), from the old Udayana cycle of romance, “contains passages unmatched for tenderness and moving dramatic power”. Here Kosambi sarcastically comments: “Yet his works were not preserved by those who thought Sanskrit the finest of languages, and spent endless effort to make it still more intricate”.

On another occasion Kosambi (1972/1965: 200–01) again mentions the same play: “In some poignant, unforgettable passages, she (sc. Vāsavadattā) mingles in the king’s half-waking dreams without daring to wake him fully. Polygamous society made the ultimate happy ending possible”.

In a touching passage Kosambi pays homage to his mother by recalling the words that Bhāsa put in the mouth of Duryodhana in the play, Smashing of [Duryodhana’s] Thigh (Urubhaṅga): “If merit be mine and rebirth fall to my lot, be thou again my mother”.

Kosambi (1975/1956: 288) is all praise for Śūdraka’s Little Clay Cart, “this most human of Sanskrit plays”. He notes that the Prakrit spoken by various characters in this play has provincial variations that seem to be modelled upon life. He extols (1972/1965, 202) the aesthetic merit of the play:

Except for a needlessly prolonged descriptive passage about the magnificence of Vasantasena’s establishment, the play preserves all the unities, balances emotion with action, relieves pathos with humour, gives scope for good acting and presentation, yet reads very well. It is one of the two works that anyone wanting to enjoy the characteristic flavour of ancient
literature (without too many long explanatory footnotes) should read in any available translation.  

Kosambi’s highest admiration is as expected reserved for Kalidāsa, “[t]he greatest name in all Sanskrit and perhaps all Indian literature”. Quite naturally, the Recognition of Śakuntalā is acknowledged to be Kalidāsa’s “supreme achievement, both in literature and stagecraft”. Kosambi notes how the story, although taken from the Mahābhārata, exhibits strikingly original handling of the love scenes. “Kalidāsa plays upon human sentiment and emotion with unequalled power”. Similarly, Vikrama and Urvaśī is called “the ultimate romance”.  

Kosambi considers Bhavabhūti to be “second only to Kalidāsa”. Mālati and Mādhava is praised for its skilful plot-construction. The possibility of the lovers being offered up as human sacrifices “must have shaken the audience beyond measure” (this and preceding passages are quoted from Kosambi 1972/1965: 201). Even Harṣa does not go unnoticed. In a light mood Kosambi (1975/1956: 304) writes:  

Harsa of Kanauj (A.D. 606–647 approximately) was himself a dramatist of high ability, though nasty-minded critics hint that his many court poets (led by the great Bāṇa, who also wrote the most ornate Sanskrit prose) prepared works to be signed by the emperor.  

In all the instances, it is to be noted, both aesthetic and historical aspects are stressed. No iconoclastic view is allowed to prevail over them.  

Kosambi on classical Sanskrit poetry  

As to poetry, Kosambi (1972/1965: 201) mentions Kalidāsa’s graceful Cloud Messenger (Meghadūta), the Birth of the War God (Kumārasambhava) and the Lineage of Raghu (Raghuvaṃśa) as poems “that rank at the summit of Sanskrit poetry by their metrical and verbal perfection”. Māgha, Bhāravi and other poets are included in the list of those “who are more fortunate in being represented by some complete works, still read with pleasure”. Śrī-Harṣa is acknowledged to be “a great poet”; his Life of Naiṣadha (Naiṣadhacarita) “is as fine a work of its sort as any” (Kosambi 1972/1965: 201–202).  

9. The other work he recommends is the Lives of the Ten Princes (Daśakumāracarita) by Daṇḍin (for which see below).
Kosambi’s response to the subhāṣita literature is also positive, even enthusiastic. He considers (1972/1965: 206) Bhartṛhari “an indigent poet of considerable ability”. Even though the preponderance of eroticism annoyed Kosambi to the utmost, the series of epigrams in the jātivrajyā section in the anthology, Subhāṣitaratnakosa, charmed him for the “lyric style and lyric content match[ing] perfectly to preserve for us the beauty of a trifling momentary incident”, such as a dog chasing a cat, quail picking up seed at the edge of a muddy field, and an aging presbyopic scholar struggling with a book before the days of lenses, etc. “These are quite exceptional topics for Sanskrit poetry, which only too often shows the unhappy crash resulting from an attempt at far higher flight”. Kosambi picks up the very first epigram in the jātivrajyā section “wherein the unknown but unmistakably Bengali poet brags of the large number of pond fish, highly spiced and fried in oil, that he has gulped down without even troubling to wash up first” (the last two passages are quoted from Kosambi 1957: xli). Similarly, he notices (1957: xli–xlii) another stanza, “[u]nique in depicting merciless oppression of villages whose consequent desolation is emphasized by the cooing of doves in the orchard”. Yet in spite of his great admiration, he declares (1957: xlii): “For all its charm, the jātivrajyā cannot aspire to the splendidly creative Faustian moment of which a superb poet could say, Verweile doch, du bist so schön [Tarry a while, you are so fair]”.10

At the end of his severe judgement of feudal Sanskrit literature, Kosambi (1957: lxii) modifies his harshness by saying:

The poetry strives to be and is, at best, exquisite rather than great. Yet, though the voice be thin, it is clear. The field might be limited as to objectives, vision, or endeavor, but excess is rare. The poet speaks across the centuries in refined musical tones bearing a soft but indelible charm visualising an elegant life. The dominant ideal, frankly expressed, is tasteful though not placid lovemaking in luxury — without vice, greed, brutal lust after blood, bourgeois concentration upon money-breeding profit. It is only fitting that their names and verses should not be altogether forgotten.11

10. Kosambi quotes from Goethe’s Faust, Part One, line 1700.
Kosambi was less enthusiastic about Sanskrit prose, but not altogether blind to such works as the *Life of Harṣa* (*Harṣacarita*) by Bāna, which he (1972/1965: 203) acknowledged as “a masterpiece of Sanskrit prose”. However, he complains that the “romantic biography of Harṣa neglects history for romance and strives to pack every phrase with at least two meanings”. Bāna’s *Kādambarī*, Kosambi thinks, “virtually killed Sanskrit prose as a useful literary medium by setting the norms for monstrous compounds that take hours to unravel”.

The greatest encomium is reserved for Daṇḍin, “[t]he most attractive of Sanskrit prose writers”. Kosambi is uncharacteristically full of praise for the *Lives of the Ten Princes*: “For verve, gusto, controlled flamboyance, gentle humour and irony, and extensive knowledge of life among all strata of common people, this work is without peer” (this and preceding passages are quoted from Kosambi 1975/1956: 289).\(^{12}\)

Daṇḍin is also praised for being “a poet and a literary critic of ability, as well as master of prose and one of the really well-read men of his day” (Kosambi 1972/1965: 203).

**Kosambi’s catholicity of taste**

In spite of such rigorous standards of literary judgement and a very personal taste, Kosambi was catholic enough to accommodate Jayadeva’s *Song of Govinda* (*Gītagovinda*). It is viewed as the “last supreme effort” of the literary lamp that “flared up magnificently just before going out” (Kosambi 1972/1965: 204). Even though Kosambi (1972/1965: 207) has no sympathy for the “divine but rather scrambled message” of the *Gītā*, he (1972/1965: 209) declares:

> The incongruities of the *Gītā* are entirely “in the Indian character”; but the Indian character was not fully set in its familiar mould till the feudal period. When gunpowder had blown Arjuna’s bow and later feudalism off the map, the Indian intellectual still turned instinctively to the *Gītā* to find some way of coping with patriotic needs in the new world of banks and

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12. Elsewhere too he praises the work by using almost the same words: “Its sparkle, verve, gusto, controlled flamboyance, penetrating but subtle humour, gentle irony, command of expression and acquaintance with a broad cross-section of life would qualify it in any language as an outstanding work” (Kosambi 1959: 291).
shares, railroads, steamships, electricity, factories, and mills. The prestige of the book has waned as India comes to grips with her modern problems. The Gītā is honoured oftener than read, and understood far less than it is recited. After such mixed ideas are displaced by clear-cut thinking based on a firm grasp of material reality, the work may still furnish some aesthetic pleasure for its power of expression and peculiar beauty.  

The reference to Arjuna’s bow vis-à-vis gunpowder is reminiscent of Marx’s famous rhetorical question: “[I]s Achilles possible when powder and shot have been invented?” (Marx & Engels 1976: 84). But that is beside the point. Kosambi’s overall critical view of Sanskrit literature and his positive attitude to individual works of merit will appear to be self-contradictory only to those who, because of their mechanistic and non-dialectical approach, fall prey to what in formal logic is known as the fallacies of division and composition. What is true of the whole need not be true of each and every part constituting it. Conversely, what is true of a part need not be true of the whole. If ten men can lift a weight together, it does not mean that each of them can lift it alone. Similarly, if one resident of an area or one belonging to the age group of 13–19, can perform a task, it does not necessarily imply that all residents of the same area or all teenagers can do so. Likewise, the merciless class analysis of the whole of Sanskrit literature need not affect the aesthetic appeal of particular works. Craftsmanship too may very well be prized in its own terms without prejudice. This is why Kosambi (1957: lVIII) could declare with impunity: “[W]e do not dismiss great writing because it is class literature.”  

Kosambi’s point of view

What makes Kosambi’s judgment of Sanskrit literature as a whole so significant is his distinct point of view. It may be encapsulated in a single sentence: does the work in question reflect or at least show acquaintance with common men and women and their way of life? Kosambi viewed history too in the same light. He was less interested in the biography and regnal years of the rulers; he would like to write history in terms of the life and conditions of the people at large. This attitude is apparent in his stray but significant remarks on the works of Sanskrit authors.

13. Cf. “There is no need to dig into the Gītā or the Bible for an ethical system sandwiched with superstition. Such books can still be enjoyed for their aesthetic value” (Kosambi 1962: 37).
Kosambi (1975/1956: 282) praises Patañjali’s *Mahābhāṣya*, not only for its intrinsic merit but also for the fact that it “gains its strength and charm from a wealth of references to common life”. Śūdraka is praised for the Prakrit with “provincial variations” that seems to be modelled upon life (Kosambi 1972/1965: 202). The *Little Clay Cart* is “significant” for “the play ends with a popular uprising and change of dynasty; far more significant that the meagre surviving tradition uniformly connects Śūdraka with the Sātavāhanas, in whose reign alone the most human of Sanskrit plays seems to have been possible” (Kosambi 1975/1956: 288). The *Lives of the Ten Princes* shows “extensive knowledge of life among all strata of common people”, and hence it is considered a “work without peer” (Kosambi 1975/1956: 289). Although the *Life of Harṣa* is generally speaking useless to the historians, Kosambi (1972/1965: 203) notes that “it contains priceless descriptions, as of the misery, panic, and havoc caused by the devastating march of a friendly army through its own territory”. The *Gītagovinda* is found too “erotic” for Kosambi (1972/1965: 204) to stomach but “[t]he music that pervades the poetry raises [it] above all others on similar themes”. Kosambi is of the opinion that “Jayadeva had had an entirely different career from the other Sena court poets, who he joined in later life”. Kosambi expected and appreciated graphic portrayal of common life in literature and this is why he valued the *jātivraiyā* epigrams so much in the midst of a vast body of literature based on “love and religion” as European literature was “based primarily upon sex (love) and violence (prowess)” (Kosambi 1975/1956: 280). Kosambi could and did find many Sanskrit works both historically significant and aesthetically satisfying as Marx and Engels, and their adherents like Georg Lukács and George Thomson, found in classical Greek literature.

*Ingalls’s misapprehension of Kosambi’s approach*

Needless to say, Kosambi’s assessment of individual Indian writers, mostly elaborated in his last work on ancient Indian history (1972/1965), gives the lie to Daniel H. H. Ingalls’s (1965: 50) complaint that “there are only two classical authors, to whom he (sc. Kosambi) allows full praise, Kālidāsa and Bhavabhūti”. Kosambi admittedly did not spell out his general theory of literature in his first book on Indian history (1975/1956). Yet, as has been

14. Cf. “Bāṇa (Har. chap.VII, particularly pp. 212–3) describes the panic and devastation caused by the royal progress through the king’s own home territory. A plague of locusts could hardly have been more ruinous for the villagers” (Kosambi 1975/1956: 306).
shown above, there are enough indications in his works to show what he valued in classical Sanskrit literature and why. Let us now see what Ingalls found so objectionable in Kosambi’s approach and assessment of classical Sanskrit literature.

Ingalls’s opposition to Kosambi’s views on classical Sanskrit literature was first made known in his 1957 review of Kosambi’s *Introduction* (1975/1956). He found the account of classical Sanskrit literature “disappointing” in two respects: first, because “an examination of a literature with a view only to determine its class origins is of limited use to those who would understand the literature. Secondly, K. has expressed his theories of literature better elsewhere” (Ingalls 1957a: 225). Ingalls’s objection was again voiced in the series editor’s Preface to the *Subhāṣitaratnakoṣa*. After enumerating the achievements of the edition, Ingalls (1957b: ix–x) added:

To one point only I must take exception, and this is a matter not of fact but of theory. In the course of four years of conversations and correspondence Kosambi, Gokhale, and I have expressed to each other fully and frequently our evaluation of these poems. On this subject Kosambi and I are in disagreement, not only because I judge the artistic merits of the poems to be higher than he does, but because I feel a class theory, while it may explain to some extent the content of a literature, is a very improper guide to its excellence. Indeed this is more than a feeling; it is a knowledge.

Ingalls promised to revert to the subject in his own introduction to the companion (translation) volume of the anthology “where I plan to treat the problem of criticism at some length”. And he kept his promise in the General *Introduction* to the said volume (which appeared in 1965 as Harvard Oriental Series 44, ironically in the same year that Kosambi’s *Outline* came out a few months later). Ingalls (1965: 49–53) here devoted four and a half pages in his attempt to refute Kosambi’s so-called “class theory”.

Here is something to embarrass Edward Said and his disciples: an Indian finding fault with classical Sanskrit literature and an American defending the ancient Indian tradition of literary creation and criticism! Ingalls in his annoyance completely overlooks Kosambi’s appreciation of Bhāsa and Śūdraka in his *Introduction*. He fails to comprehend the significance of

15. He mentions Kosambi’s “The Quality of Renunciation in Bhartṛhari’s Poetry” (first published in 1941, a revised version of which appeared in Bharatiya Vidya in 1946) and the *Introduction* to the forthcoming edition of the *Subhāṣitaratnakoṣa*. 
Kosambi’s praise for *Dhammapada* along with *La Divina Commedia* and *Pilgrim’s Progress*. Yet the juxtaposition of these three works clearly exhibits Kosambi’s open-mindedness: the essentially religious nature of the last two works did not deter him from admitting their aesthetic worth and true greatness. It also shows that Kosambi did not judge a work of art by any “foreign” standard (as Ingalls charged him with) but had only one standard: the style should be simple and unadorned. We know from Basham’s “personal tribute” to Kosambi that Kosambi “loved Bunyan because his language was so beautiful and simple, he was a product of the popular culture of the time, and he imparted valuable moral lessons, even to one who had no faith” (Basham 1974: 19).

Ingalls’s reference to *The Parable of Māluṅkyaputta* (*Cūla Māluṅkya Sutta, Majjhima Nikāya*, 2.2.3) at the end of his polemics contributes nothing to the point at issue. He writes at the end of his *General Introduction* (Ingalls 1965: 53):

> The Buddha spoke to Māluṅkyaputta of a man wounded with an arrow who would not let the surgeon draw the shaft until he knew the caste of the man who had shot it. Was that man more unreasonable than one who will not listen to beauty until he knows that it comes from a new economic class that advances the techniques of production?

We have already seen that Kosambi did not enquire about the class origin of Kālidāsa or Śūdraka or Bhavabhūti when he praised their works in superlative terms. He did “listen to beauty” in the works of others too. So it is unfair to compare him with the wounded man in the Buddhist legend. Kosambi was capable of appreciating individual works of art for their own merit. He had never taken an agnostic position in regard to anything on earth, let alone literature. He always knew what he liked and why. He had read and digested his Marx and Engels and could apply Marxism creatively in his study of literature, whether ancient or modern, Indian or Western. Depiction of common men’s life and activities pleased him more than the sickening indulgence in amoral love intrigues so ubiquitous in classical Sanskrit literature. This is why he prized the *jātivrajyā* epigrams so much. Ingalls too was charmed by those vignettes in verse, and he (1974: 29) later admitted:

> As I look back it seems to me that the sober vision of the Pāla poets forced a corresponding sobriety upon us. Kosambi agreed to give up the fireworks [abounding in the first draft of his Introduction]; I agreed that he might print whatever social message he could elicit from the Sanskrit poetry.
CONCLUSION

The above discussion, I hope, will help readers comprehend how wrong both Dasgupta and Ingalls were in their understanding of the proper Marxist approach to art and literature. The totally ahistorical and idealist viewpoints adopted by Dasgupta and Ingalls can be rectified by studying Kosambi’s books and articles on Indian history, and the Introductions to the works he edited, all of which contain, among other things, original sidelights on classical Sanskrit literature.

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