

KALIDASA'S ABHIJNAN SHAKUNTALAM

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THIS paper aims to deal with Kalidasa's masterpiece Abhijnan Shakuntalam.. Before dealing with this play it is worthwhile for us to acquaint ourselves with the origins of the drama in India which will help us in understanding this play in its true perspective.

While manoeuvring my pen to write about the origin of the drama in India, I found myself assailed with a feeling that the discerning reader will start conjecturing about when Kalidasa was born, because Kalidasa's time was not historically explored and no one definitely knows when Kalidasa was born and when his works were composed.

When he was born and how he was loved are shrouded in impenetrable mystery. It seems really impossible to gain access to his life-history, piercing through the deep shroud of mystery that surrounds the life of Kalidasa. Who is there who could shepherd to the place he was born in and the time when he was born and to the lineage he was born to glorify? Many other ancient poets have left behind in their works details of their birth, lineage and times from which their biographies can be constructed. Only Kalidasa was indifferent and nonchalant to this practice of leaving behind any information about himself, his lineage and his time. It seems possible that Kalidasa, a divinely gifted poet, realized that what the time preserves from oblivion survives the ages or attains eternity, otherwise no attempt made by man persists in the face of onslaught of time. Besides the language in which Kalidas composed his works has already gone obsolete. But the poetic emotion with which the poet imbued his works is still streaming through the time and place and we are bathing ourselves in it. Kalidasa poured himself into this flow of emotion and we taste the flavour of his emotion. Man cannot surmount his own shadow. All the likes and dislikes of the poet and his nature and his feelings get reflected in his or her work. The time destroyed the perishable body of Kalidasa, but India has preserved his works, embraced fondly in her breasts. Lost forever in the abysmal gulf of the past was whether he was handsome or ugly, tall or short, whether he was Brahmin or of other caste or whether he inhabited Bengal or another province. The biographical information about the poet and dramatist has been lost for ever in the abyss of oblivion or been enclaved in the darkness of abysmal gulf of the past. But the image of the poet manifested in his works has conquered the ages and the time has failed to diminish it.

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We can surmise from the evidence left behind in his works that Kalidasa was born in the first half of the fifties of the fifth century when the Gupta empire had reached its apex, because his works, as are other works not his, are redolent of the pictures of the time and the place he lived in. It was the historical fact that wherever he was born, his fascination lay with Ujjayani in the jurisdiction of the province of Avanti. Ujjayani was one of the capitals of Chandragupta Vikramaditya of the Gupta dynasty. A majority of pundits accord with this hypothesis. Now let us switch back to our main discussion.

We should know at the outset that the *Natyasastra* of Bharata, the treatise on drama, is the oldest surviving text expatiating on the theory of drama and dramatics. This treatise claiming for itself a divine origin stands often known as the fifth Veda accessible even to those, including women and Sudras, denied access to the four Vedas. It is believed that Brahma created this fifth Veda called *Natyaveda*, imbuing it with the relevant elements extracted out of the four Vedas. Among the aims that governed the creation of the *Natyasastras* are those to illustrate the ways of the world, bad or good, to proffer good advice, and, through entertainment, to ease suffering people out of their ailments and, above all, to solve other problems that afflict human beings. Drama symbolizes a widened view of the world and the actions of persons stripped of their individualities and does not give a damn, so to say, for the specific situations and emotions of individuals. Let us hear what Chandra Rajan says about the ‘chief goal’ of the drama in her Introduction to ‘Complete Works of Kalidasa (Vol. 2). ‘The Chief goal of [the] drama,’ she says, ‘is to produce *rasa*, the aesthetic emotion evoked by the appropriate mood built cumulatively’ not only on words, but also on the use of ‘mime and gesture, costume and jewellery.’ (2002:16). *Rasa* is an emotion ‘depersonalised’, rid of the freaks of circumstance; it is an emotion refurbished, filtered, as it is, through art. In the Sanskrit drama verse and prose, dance, music and spectacle blend, and poetry, music and dance considered as one art. ‘The words *nata* (actor, dancer, mime). *Natya* (dancing, dramatic art) and *nataka* (play) all derive from (the) root, *nat*, to act or represent.’ (2002: 16).

There is still current a difference of opinions as to the composition of the *Natyasastra*. One opinion speaks of the *Natyasastra* as having compiled the texts which previously existed in one form or another; another opinion holds that it has organized into a coherent whole the theories and practices that prevailed then. But it is believed that the *Natyasastra* in the present form ‘might well be later than Kalidasa,’ says Chandra Rajan, ‘depending on which century we choose to place the poet in.’ (P. 16). ‘It is possible,’ she continues, ‘that the author of the *Natyasastra* sat down to compose his treatise with Kalidasa’s plays before him.’ (P. 16). The authors drew profusely on Kalidas’s plays in writing his treatise. This statement stands its ground, I believe, and nullifies the theory that the *Natyasastra* was created by Brahma. Another comment that it is the organization of the floating theories and practices equally holds its ground. We are not out here to debate on the divergence of opinions about the composition of the *Natyasastra*.

It is the proven truth that the origins of the drama predated the composition of Kalidasa’s plays.. Kalidasa had had to have a concrete theory to build his plays on. It is to the Vedas that the origins of the drama can be traced back. In the Rig Veda abound a number of poems interspersed with dramatic elements; that is, the dialogue, among others, between *Urvasi*, the celestial nymph and *Pururava*, the mythic king, which Kalidas purports to have drawn upon in composing his second play *Vikramorvasiyam*; monologues like that which *Vac* used to declaim

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her role in creating the universe; soliloquy like that of Vasistha despairing of rising from the ‘profound sense of alienation from the divine presence.’ (P.17). There are a few poems in the group which encapsulates the germs of stories or cryptic references to events, which could be developed into plots. As I have said earlier, Kalidasa has fleshed out the Usha-Pururava dialogue into the lyrical play Vikramorvasiam.

The presence of a refrain in some of the Vedic hymns points to a choral element. The rituals of sacrifice, some of them extending a long period are strongly redolent of dramatic flavour, for the intricate succession of ceremonies that embroidered the chanting of the Vedic hymns was suggestive of dramatic representation. The rituals re-enact cosmic events and this re-enactment becomes the essence of the Vedic sacrifice (yajna) with the priests officiating at the Yojna for gods and seers in re-enacting the cosmic events. There are mentioned in the Vedic literature beautifully dressed and bejewelled maidens singing and dancing round the sacred altars, jars of holy water in their hands. We also find mentioned in the Vedic literature chariot races and contests between fair Vaishyas and dark Sudras over the possession of white round skins that symbolize the sun (light). This gives us to understand that there is some amount of action with which the chanting of hymns and the performance of the rituals were spiced.

It is not advisable to linger on the origins of the drama, for I shall have to consider about the constraint on space. Suffice it to say here that the germs of the Sanskrit drama lie in abundance in the Vedas.

Sanskrit drama characterizes itself by having originated from dance and miming, its essential part being demonstrated by its stage direction. The entire fourth act in Urvashi ‘in the Bengali recension’ abounds with dance and song which intermix with snippets of prose when the king roams about, round the bend. There is a subtle feeling of dancing in where there is no dancing, which reveals that Sanskrit drama heavily hinges on dance-technique comprising ‘the stances adopted by the (sic) various characters, their gestures, [their] facial expressions, their very gait and style of walking.’ (P.22).

Kalidasa bequeathed to us three long lyrical poems, three plays and one epic uncompleted. It is difficult to ascertain their chronology, though. The three long lyrical poems are: The Ritusamharam (The Gathering of the Seasons), Kumarasambhavan (The Birth of Kumara or the Birth of the Son), and Meghadutam (The Cloud Messenger); the three plays are: Malavikagnimitram (Malavika and Agnimitram), Vikramorvasiyam (Vikrama and Urvasi), and Abhijnanasakuntalam (The Recognition of Sakuntala); and the uncompleted epic is: Raghuvamsam (Raghu’s Dynasty) (Reference The Complete Works of Kalidasa, Vol. Two; 2002:24).

It’s time we passed on to dealing with Abhijnan Shakauntalam. The following unreserved praise in verse that the German poet Goethe, quoted by Dr Anil Kumar Basu in his book ‘Abhijnan Shakuntalam’ has heaped on Abhijnan Shakuntalam attests to the magnificence of the play, this verse having been translated into English from the German by Edward Backhouse Eastwick (E.B. Eastwick):

Wouldst thou the young year’s bossoms
and the fruits of its decline,
And all by which the soul is charmed,
enraptured, feasted, fed,

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Wouldst thou the earth and heaven,
itself in one sole name combined?
I name thee, O Sakuntala!

All at once is said.
(2003: Introduction to the Third Edition, P.2)

In dealing with this magnificent play we shall focus on the some of the aspects and problems that characterize Kalidasa's the most important play, *Abhijnan Shakuntalam*. The play blends in a unified while romance and fairy tale, embroidered with the elements of comedy. 'In the last sections of the *Satapath Brahmana*,² says Chandra Rajan (1994:58), 'that are devoted wholly to the description of the rituals of the Horse-Sacrifice (*Asvamedha Yojna*) where the names of some of the kings who performed them are mentioned, we come across this line[:]' "Om Nadapit the Apsara Sakuntala comceived (bore) Bharata." This is the earliest literary reference to Sakuntala and her son (the little boy *Sarva-damana* in the play) who performed many horse-sacrifices on the banks of the rive *Yamuna* after he had conquered the world, fulfilling the prophecy of the mystic personage *Marica*...Nadapit is glossed by the commentator as *Kamva's hermitage*. 'But that that identification,' she continued. 'has obviously been made on the basis of the *Sakuntala-Dushmanta* story in the *Mahabharata*, where however, the *Nadapit* does not occur.' Unfortunately the original story of *Shakuntala* alluded to in the *Satapath Brahmana* was lost to us. What has come down to us is a very long and telluric version of the story in the epic. Now that the *Nadapit* is lost to us, we have nothing else at our disposal but conjecturing about what it really was.

The *Shakuntala-Dushmanta* story, as it appears in the *Mahabharata*, has been considerably changed in the play composed by the *Kalidasa*. *Kalidasa* has taken much liberty in improving upon the original story that occurs in the *Mahabharata*. In fact, the original story has been metamorphosed in the hand of *Kalidasa*.

Kalidasa's Abhijnan Shakuntalam differs from the *Mahabharata* story in that *Kalidasa* has introduced into his play the saint *Durvasa* to make him curse *Shakuntala*, whereas in the *Mahbharata* story the saint *Durvasa* does not figure. In the *Mahabharata* story King *Dushmanta* and *Shakuntala* consummate a marriage secretly, but *Dushmanta* later in the palace spurns her for fear of being slighted, for it did not behoove such a gallant king as he is to have stooped so low as to give himself over to the passion for a woman. To save *Dushmanta* from the slur put on him, on his reputation, *Kalidasa* has introduced the saint *Durvasa* and made him curse *Shakuntala*.

To expatiate upon the difference a synopsis of the play is necessitated, as follows
Shakuntala, the protagonist in the play '*Abhijnan Shakuntalam* composed by *Kalidasa* is the daughter of the sage *Vishwamitra* and *Menaka*., a celestial nymph. She is left after her birth, abandoned by her parents in the forest, destined to be brought up in the sylvan hermitage of the sage *Kanva*. She grows up to a maiden innocent and of paramount beauty,

It so happens that when the sage *Kanva* and other elders of the sylvan hermitage has gone away on a pilgrimage, *Dushmanta*, the king of *Hastinapura*, comes down to the forest to hunt, where the hermitage is situated and while he is hunting, his eyes spot the hermitage and fall on *Shakuntala*, surrounded by her two friends *Priyangbada* and *Anusuya*. Her exquisite beauty charms him into courting her in the manner befitting a king and marries her. He need to return to

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the palace to attend to his royal duties. He gives her a ring as a memento of their marriage and when she goes over to the court she must show it so that she can claim to be his queen. Since then Shakuntala had found herself rapt in thought about Dushmanta.

One day the irascible sage Durvasa arrives in the hermitage. Shakuntala is so rapt in her thought about Dushmanta that he could not notice the arriving of Durvasa. Durvasa puts it down to her showing of disrespect to him and curses her, saying that he who she is thinking of will forget her. Anusuya and Priyangbada who are about prostrate themselves at his feet and begs for his mercy on Shakuntala's behalf. Pacified, Durvasa says that his curse won't go vain and adds that if she shows the ring given her to Dushmanta, then he will remember her.

When going over to the palace to meet her husband on a boat across a river, she loses the ring in the river through her carelessness. When she reaches the palace, Dushmanta could not recognize her, because she could not show him the ring. She returns to the hermitage, disappointed and dejected.

It so happens that a fisherman comes by it in the belly of a fish and shows it to the king Dushmanta realizes his mistake and this paves the way for Dushmanta and Shakuntala to be reunited with their son.

But in the Mahabharata version of the story there is no giving of a ring to Shakuntala by Dushmanta. They are reunited when Dushmanta happens to see their son Bharata playing in the sylvan hermitage with a baby lion and, impressed by his fearlessness and braveness, asks him about his parentage.

Kalidasa in his play has also introduced Anusuya and Priyangbada as companions of Shakuntala. Anusuya and Priyangbada are the creations of Kalidasa to aggrandize the character of Shakuntala. These two comely dear friends of Shakuntala always surround her. They sacrifice themselves in order to help her to grow into a beautiful maiden. Rabindranath says of them, 'Shakuntala herself is one-third of Shakuntala and Anusuya and Priyangbada are her two-thirds, Shakuntala's as a small one.' This comment reproduced here in my English translation is quoted in 'Abhijnana Shakuntalam' (P. 131). From the beginning of the play down to Shakuntala's travel to her husband's house they surround her in love and affection. They always stay by her when in the act of splashing water on Shakuntala beneath the tree in the hermitage, when in consoling her in her pangs of separation from Dushmanta and when in clandestinely meeting him in the grove of cane. They themselves accord cordial reception to the king into the sylvan hermitage and answer all the questions asked by Dushmanta about Shakuntala. They cajole the way out of the sage Durvasa the way to get rid of the curse that the sage has pronounced on Shakuntala. They cry their hearts out when Shakuntala sets out to her husband's house.

Anusuya and Priyangbada are the same age as Shakuntala, possessing equal beauty and quality. But their characters are different. Anusuya is grave, worldly-wise and farsighted, whereas Priyangbada is feeble, fond of pleasure and talkative. What Anusuya accepts, judged by her intelligence Priyangbada accepts in pure faith. Though Anusuya is happy at the marriage of Dushmanta and Shakuntala, she could not erase the doubt out of her mind on Shakuntala's score. But Priyangbada bubbles over with delight at the marriage.

Anusuya does not puzzle at danger but Priyangbada gets nonplussed and bewildered when danger presents itself. Priyangbada becomes bewildered, not knowing what to do, when the sage Durvasa has cursed Shakuntala. But Anusuya, instead of being puzzled, prevails upon the sage to tell the way of getting rid of his curse. In fact, Anusuya and Priyangbada together act as



a foil to the development of the character of Shakuntala and contribute greatly to the pleasure of reading and seeing enacted on the stage the play.

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