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**Module 05:Kalidasa: *Abhignana Shakuntalam***

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## **Kalidasa: *Abhijnana Shakuntalam***

### Introduction:

Abhijnana-Shakuntalam is a seven act Sanskrit play Written by one of the greatest poets of India, Kalidas. Literally the meaning of the mane of the play is *The recognition of Shakuntala by a Token*. It is the first ever Indian play to be translated into any western language. Sir William Jones first translated it into English in 1789. Thus the play is not only one of the best works in Sanskrit literature, but also in the world literature. Abhijnana-Shakuntalam is a play based on a story from the Mahabharata. Kalidasa turned the story into an elegant piece of art by giving it the theme of love, passion, reunion, separation the same into an elegant work of art with a lot of innovations. The play is not entirely a pure Sanskrit play, but some elements of some Indian dialects best known as Maharashtri Prakrit are found. The period in which the play was written has ever been unknown. It is probably because no evidence has yet been found on the period of lifetime. But it is assumed that he might have lived in between 2<sup>nd</sup> century B.C to 4<sup>th</sup> century A.D. The play is beautifully intertwined with the dramatic power and poetic beauty.

### About the Play Wright:

Kalidas is one of the greatest classical Sanskrit poets is also universally regarded as the greatest of the Sanskrit dramatists of ancient India. We have very limited amount of information about his life and time. But we can have our idea about the period of his works by the historical references he gave in his writing. The identification of King Vikramaditya as the poet's patron in

the prologue of Shakuntala refers to Chandragupta II, which indicates that Kalidas would have lived in the Gupta Empire near the end of the fourth century. So, we can assume that Kalidasa wrote sometime between the third and the sixth centuries. The writings of Kalidasa reveal his attachment to the city of Ujjayini, which is associated with contemporary Ujjain in the western part of Madhya Pradesh. His versatility as a poet, dramatists, court person, his modesty, sense of self-respect are often found in his other works. Such as: Malavikagnimitra, Vikramorvasiya, Abhijnana-Sakuntala (dramas) and poems like Raghuvamsa, Kumarasambhava and Meghaduta.

Kalidasa's plays carries notion of pre-modern India and an insider understanding of court life. His plays are often based on Hindu mythology, epics, legends usually dealing with gods, kings, cities, palaces, nature etc. Almost all his plays are centered around a king and his interaction at home with his royal retinue and outside the palace with mortals and divine beings examines the conflict between duty and desire. At the sometime his plays are also concerned about a woman who seems to exist outside of the proper courtly circles (as in the case of Shakuntala, who lives in a forest hermitage) or practically (as in the case of Malavika in Malavikagnimitra, who lives in the palace as part of the Queen's retinue, but is thought to be of second-class status). The king's romantic interest in each play, then, appears to be in conflict with his royal identity and responsibility. However, each woman turns out to be of royal or divine identity. Kalidasa's plays chart their kings' courses in a circle back to identities that are, really, unchanging, but which might be better understood after the action of the plays has been accomplished.

### Abhijnana-Shakuntalam and its connection with Mahabharata:

The version of Abhijnana-Sakuntalam in the famous epic of Mahabharata is slightly different to the original version. In the Mahabharata version, Sakuntala had to stay apart from her husband, king Dushyanta, for a very long time. It is only when their son Bharata was born that Dushyanta found him playing in the forest with a couple of lion cubs, opening their muth with his bare hands, trying to count their teeth. Seeing a little boy playing with such courage amongst lions, Dushyanta becomes curious about the boy and asks him about his parents. The little boy then



takes him to Kanva rishi's ashram where Dushyant meets Sakuntala and remembers everything. This fills up Dushyant's heart with warmth and joy; he gets reunited with his long lost family and takes his wife and his son back home in Hastinapur. Bharata is known to be the ancestor of Kauravas and Pandavas, who partook in the epic war of Mahabharata. It is said that it is after the name of Bharata that India took its name. India was known as Bharatadesham which precisely

means the land of Bharata. Although, this version is more popular mythology wise but Kalidasa's original version is still considered to be the standard one.

## Synopsis of the play

### Prologue:

The play opens with a benediction to the gods and after the benediction the director and actress are enter the stage. The director introduces the name of the play as Abhijnanasakuntalam and asks to treat the audience with a song about the season summer. She sings so well that the director is spellbound and forgets why he is on the stage until she reminds the purpose of their appearance. The prologue ends with the director mentioning about failing of memory and relates it to the hunting Dushyanta.

**Act One:** Following the *nandi*-prayer, the director and an actress appear in a prologue. The director and the actress discuss the audience and the appropriate play to perform for them. They decide upon Kalidasa's play *Shakuntala*, but the director is so caught away by a song that the actress sings that he forgets which play they've decided on. The actress reminds him. Duhshanta enters on a chariot, chasing a deer. A hermit stops him, pointing out that he has entered a hermitage in which the animal is protected. The king relents. The hermit blesses the king with the promise of a son. Passing further into the hermitage, King Duhshanta surreptitiously watches Shakuntala, Anusuya, and Priyamvada. When a bee troubles Shakuntala, Duhshanta leaves his



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hiding place, but does not reveal that he is the king, though he gives to Shakuntala a ring that suggests his identity. The king's soldiers disturb the hermitage and he leaves to draw them away.

**Act Two:** The clown Madhavya enters, complaining. Madhavya and the king conspire to get close to Shakuntala. Duhshanta sends Madhavya back to the palace to participate in his place at the ceremonies marking the end of the king's mother's fast.

**Act Three:** Having revealed his identity, King Duhshanta rests in the hermitage. The king spies on Anusuya, Priyamvada, and Shakuntala, talking obliquely of romance. He discerns that Shakuntala is smitten with him. When Shakuntala sings a love poem, the king steps out of hiding. They all speak obliquely of romance. Anusuya and Priyamvada slip away. Duhshanta and Shakuntala get close, but the king hides when Gautami appears. The king puzzles over his failure to take advantage of the moment, then leaves to protect the evening rites.

**Act Four:** Anusuya and Priyamvada discuss Shakuntala's marriage to Duhshanta, which has been accomplished simply by the two lovers' common consent. They hear Durvasas's angry voice, chastising Shakuntala for not attending to him properly upon his arrival at the hermitage. Because she is distracted by thoughts of her lover, the sage imposes a curse that her lover will completely forget her. Priyamvada dashes offstage and returns to report that because she implored the sage to reconsider, Durvasas has allowed that although the king will forget Shakuntala, the glimpse of the ring the king gave to her will restore his memory. Shakuntala prepares to leave for the king's palace, escorted by Gautami, Sharngarava, and Saradvata. Shakuntala's departure from the hermitage is charged with emotion.

**Act Five:** King Duhshanta sends Madhavya into the king's chambers to try to mollify Queen Hamsapadika, who is upset over the king's feelings for his other wives. The embassy from Kanva's hermitage is announced in the court. Shakuntala, Gautami, Sharngarava, and Saradvata enter. They all feel misgivings. Sharngarava informs the king that Shakuntala is pregnant, and



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requests that the king receive her as his wife. The king has forgotten Shakuntala entirely, and treats the request as a scam. Shakuntala discovers that Duhshanta's ring has disappeared from her finger. Gautami speculates that Shakuntala lost it while bathing. Shakuntala accuses the king of exploiting her. The king responds with accusations of his own. Sharngarava repudiates Shakuntala and refuses to return her to the hermitage, though Gautami pleads otherwise. A court priest convinces the king to allow Shakuntala to stay in the palace until she gives birth so that her son can be examined for marks of royalty. The priest proposes to send her back to the hermitage if the child proves to have no such signs. The king consents to the priest's plan, but before it can be implemented, Shakuntala storms out, calling the earth to receive her. The report returns from offstage that a ray of light seized Shakuntala and carried her off. King Duhshanta is bewildered.

**Act Six:** Two policemen bring a fisherman to the chief of police with the accusation that the fisherman has stolen a royal signet ring the officers have found in his possession. The fisherman claims to have found it in the belly of a fish. The police chief goes to the palace and returns with the order to release the fisherman and with compensatory payment for the ring. The police chief reports that the sight of the ring disturbed the king. Sanumati comes invisibly to check up on Duhshanta and overhears two maids discussing the king's miserable condition with the royal chamberlain. Duhshanta has cancelled all celebrations. Sanumati comments to herself that Shakuntala is similarly miserable. Duhshanta and Madhavya talk of what has happened while Sanumati listens. Chaturika brings in the king's painting of Shakuntala. The king loses himself in the painting. Word comes that Queen Vasumati is on her way. Madhavya takes the painting and flees. Word of a shipwreck arrives. A wealthy merchant is dead. Duhshanta orders that the merchant's wealth go to one of his surviving wives who is pregnant. Duhshanta hears a cry of distress. Matali appears and takes Duhshanta to fight off demons threatening Indra.

**Act Seven:** Having vanquished the demons, Matali and Duhshanta pass through heaven. Duhshanta asks to visit Maricha's celestial hermitage. Matali leaves Duhshanta beneath a hermitage tree. The king hears a disturbance and finds a young boy wrestling with a lion cub. Duhshanta sees the marks of royalty on the boy. The boy's armlet falls off and Duhshanta picks



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it up. Two ascetics tell Duhshanta that if anyone but the boy's parents picks up the armlet, it turns to a snake and strikes the perpetrator. Shakuntala arrives. She does not, at first, recognize Duhshanta, who recounts the manner in which the ring restored his memory. Matali, Maricha, and Aditi arrive. They explain Durvasas's curse. The family is reunited and returns to Duhshanta's palace.

### Major Themes in *Abhijnana Shakuntalam*:

#### **Love and Duty**

Not only the *Shakuntala*, Barbara Stoler Miller writes, but “all of Kalidasa's plays focus on the critical tension between desire and duty that is aesthetically manifest in the relation of the erotic sentiment (*srngararasa*) to the heroic (*virarasa*).” The tension inherent in *Shakuntala*, in other words, is between the “four *purusarthas*” – the “aims of man: duty, desire, wealth, and freedom” – and not necessarily “personal conflict.” In the case of both Dusyanta and Shakuntala, duty and passion collide head-to-head: Dusyanta is pulled between his royal responsibilities (visible in his love of hunting and his eventual return to the kingdom) and his husbandly responsibilities (to receive Shakuntala and accept her son as his heir); Shakuntala finds herself in the middle of her ascetic responsibilities (to receive guests, for example) and her wifely ones (to leave home and pursue Dusyanta). Just as Dusyanta is a symbol of both royalty and passion, so is Shakuntala a symbol of both asceticism and passion. As the sage's curse makes known, negative consequences can come of subjugating one's passion to one's other responsibilities. On the other hand, the ring of recollection points toward a possible integration of both love and duty.

Some claim that Kalidasa integrates these two successfully in the *Shakuntala*. Krishnamoorthy, for one, insists that Dusyanta is a “paragon of decorum” and that “Kalidasa succeeds [in merging love and duty] because of his discretion in the choice of his royal heroes... All of them are gifted connoisseurs; and they delight in the fine arts of painting, music, dance, and poetry. Much married though they be, they will yet be open to new attractions, and the intensity of their new

passion is determined by the degree of difficulty in winning the beloved. In the royal harem, they observe a gentleman's code of courtesy, and they will go to any extent in appeasing the anger of jealous queens." In other words, Dusyanta is so morally perfect that his (rather less than kingly) pursuit of Shakuntala could not be anything other than in accordance with his royal obligations. Ingalls adds: "Dusyanta is so sure of his inner equipoise that when he sees a maiden who rouses his desire, he immediately knows that she must be of suitable caste and marriageable. Otherwise his heart would not have responded." "The pursuit of power and sex" are, at the hands of Kalidasa, "in accordance with *dharma*." How – or if – the play ultimately achieves this is at the discretion of the reader.

### **The Forest and the City**

There is little doubt on the part of modern critics that Kalidasa loved nature. As much as nature may have been a common theme in classical Sanskrit poetry, there is something about Kalidasa's particular use of the natural world that stands out. "In Kalidasa's treatment of nature there is an emotional suggestiveness that was new to Sanskrit," Ingalls writes. "[Because of the suggestiveness of nature,] the prospect of the life of contemplation is essentially uncreative. It offers solace rather than a cure." In *Shakuntala*, nature has the power to "reintegrate conflicting aspects of life," becoming a locus of the "harmonies of man and nature."

Some go so far as to say that Kalidasa's use of nature in the *Shakuntala* is "spiritualized" and that an "atmosphere of sanctity...pervades the play." Kalidasa's "Personification of natural objects springs from minute observation, and these combine with fancies and conceits derived from mythology and tradition to produce the unique Kalidasan image." Ryder writes of this elevated position of nature: "It is hardly true to say that [Kalidasa] personifies rivers and mountains and trees; to him they have a conscious individuality as truly and as certainly as animals or men or gods... Kalidasa's knowledge of nature is not only sympathetic, it is also minutely accurate." He adds, "It is delightful to imagine a meeting between Kalidasa and Darwin. They would have understood each other perfectly; for in each the same kind of imagination worked with the same wealth of observed fact." Indeed, Kalidasa was "the only poet

in Sanskrit who conceived of nature, though symbolically, as the central concern of most of his works, poetic as well as dramatic... the cloud becomes the 'hero' of his poem *Meghaduta*..." Of the perfection of nature in the *Shakuntala*, Ingalls writes that "human love in Kanva's retreat is expressed entirely in animal and vegetable images... as opposed to the court, there is no luxury in the asrama, no polygamy, no jealousy."

The consistent equation of Shakuntala with the natural world, however, may lead one to believe otherwise. There are, in fact, struggles inherent in Shakuntala's character and in her relationship with Dusyanta that are expressed through natural images. To begin with, many agree that Shakuntala's character and the natural world are deeply intertwined throughout the play: "Kalidasa presents the heroine as Nature's darling, innocent as a deer and caught up in a love for a highly sophisticated man," writes Krishnamoorthy, clearly wishing to represent Shakuntala (and Nature itself) as willingly submissive to the desires of men. Indeed, he writes, "Women and nature as so closely identified that it is almost impossible to know which the poet is speaking of." Stoler Miller adds that "the heroine is characteristically interchangeable with elements of nature, whose procreative energies she personifies. The parts of her body are conventionally equated with natural objects." Indeed, as Anderson points out, "we must remind ourselves that each phase of the nature imagery has a symbolic value to the Indian audience." Vidya Niwas Misra believes that of these images, the mango-blossom is of particular importance in connection with Shakuntala's character: "For Kalidasa the mango-blossom has therefore a treble meaning, as an object of nature, as an emblem of fruitful love and the Spring of youth and lastly as a symbol of womanhood realized in its completeness in motherhood. It also signifies the continuity of human existence and secondarily any offspring."

Yet if Shakuntala is so deeply associated with the positive creative forces of the mango-blossom, and if there is no jealousy or infidelity in nature as there is in the royal court, we might have to come up with another explanation for the spurned queen Hamsapadika's song (in Act V) about Dusyanta's infidelity. For in this song, not only are the images of nature used as a metaphor for

the king's cheating, but Hamsapadika herself takes the place of the mango-blossom, while Shakuntala is the lotus preferred by Dusyanta, the errant bee. Sawhney points out that "the [Shakuntala] who is forgotten is the early Shakuntala, so deer-like as to be almost a doe herself, so akin to the creeper, the leaf, the petal, as to be simply one more instance of the natural world whose submission to the king is eroticized (but also critiqued) by the movement of the drama." Not all is harmonious in nature.

Still, there is something fantastical about nature that Kalidasa is eager to bring out in *Shakuntala*. The very prologue shows us, through the actress's Prakrit song about summer, just how easy (and pleasant) it is to lose oneself in the natural perfection of the forest. Like Kanva's pupils who accompany Shakuntala to Dusyanta's court, we too are reluctant to leave the natural comforts of the forest: they, and we, curse the city and its king when nature (symbolized by Shakuntala) is rejected from a place beside urban life (symbolized by the king). The traditional equation of outer beauty with inner virtue comes out in Kalidasa's use of nature, especially in the way that even the most "simple" of the forest's characters are highly polite.

### **Art and the Connoisseur**

*Shakuntala* explores an interesting connection between the pleasure of love and the pleasure of art. "Kalidasa's heroes are not just kings and lovers," Stoler Miller notes, "but connoisseurs of natural beauty and art...According to Kalidasa, aesthetic pleasure, like deep love, depends on attention to detail and continual discovery of new associations." In the *Shakuntala*, connoisseurship appears with respect to visual art: "Everyone who has read Kalidasa will recall a verse or two on painting and sculpture," Ingalls comments, "but it is only when these references are collected that one sees how deep an impression these arts made on the poet...One is reminded of the dependence of Virgil's poetry on art, especially on mural painting."

An exemplary scene in *Shakuntala* is the scene in which Dusyanta examines a picture of

Shakuntala that he has painted. Here, Sawhney writes, the king has involved himself in the painting so much that he is unable to relish it at a removed distance, as a connoisseur should. "The image is a great likeness, so evocative of Sakuntala that it can even be mistaken for her. But we are also shown that the painting is a reproduction, not only of Sakuntala, but (in a certain way) of Dusyanta as well: drops of perspiration and tears have smudged the painting just enough to make it an image of both the beloved and the lover's despair. Indeed as the nymph Sanumati notes, the king's experience now follows the lines of the painting (yathalikhitanubhavesah); meaning that he experiences again his meeting with Sakuntala as he paints her, the act of inscription now governing the movement of memory." It is as if his inability to act as a proper connoisseur in this scene symbolizes his psychological shift from the classic hero he once was to a different sort of person that he will become: a reflection, perhaps, of the older self that he remembers, yet new in his final union with Shakuntala.

### Conclusion:

"Shakuntala" can be compared to the plays based on The Ramayana and consider the problems of moral choice and fate. The hero Rama is confronted with choices to be made and is driven by a certain fate. The mood of pity pervades the story. Similarly, in "Shakuntala", as in The Ramayana, suffering is displayed for the sake of relishing the state of suffering. The production of Sanskrit literature reached its height of development in the 1st to the 7th centuries. In addition to sacred and philosophical writings, such genres as erotic and devotional lyrics, court poetry, plays, and narrative folktales emerged. The Sanskrit philosophies were the source of philosophical writing in the later literatures, and the Sanskrit schools of rhetoric were of great importance for the development of court poetry in many of the modern literatures. "Shakuntala" by the author Kalidasa is in the literary form of a drama and a heroic romance. It is a work which celebrates the harmonious interplay and ultimate unity of complementary aspects of reality. Unity emerging from diversity pervades the entire work at many levels.



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