



Kalidas's *Abhigyanam Shakuntalam*: A Confluence of Myth, Religion and Environmental Sustainability

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ABSTRACT

Borrowed from the legendary episode of Dushyanta-Shakuntala narrated in the Adi parva of *Mahabharat*, Kalidas, the greatest playwright of Ancient India in the court of Vikramaditya of 5th CE BC, has done the superb dramatisation of that love episode between Dushyanta and Shakuntala in 7 acts which extols him to the rank of a world-class playwright.

Deserted by the original parents, Maharshi Viswamitra and Apsara Menaka, Shakuntala grows up under the sanctity of sainthood of Rishi Kanwa in the sylvan beauty of nature. Love at first sight begins when King Dushyanta in his mad pursuit of hunting a male deer encounters an exquisitely pretty lady in the abode of Nature, as a daughter of Green Nature. As a token of love and reminiscence, Dushyanta offers a ring to Shakuntala that acts as a symbol of loss and reunion in the core of the plot.

To her rich inheritance of hermitage, Rishi Kanwa instills in her the fundamental religion of sustainability, as a married lady in her husband's house, at the time of her departure from Nature's abode to the domestic confinement in Dushyanta's house.

Nature, in this love episode, plays a key role in magnifying the beauty of adolescence and virginity of Shakuntala and equally reciprocates in sharing at her departure from Kanwa's house. Rishi Kanwa in accompanying Shakuntala, takes permission of the trees, herbs, shrubs, animals and birds in Nature whom Shakuntala nurtured as a doting mother. The entire flora and fauna, surrounding Rishi Kanwa's house became silent and sad. This kind of organic involvement, caring and inter-dependence between Shakuntala and Nature percolates a nice ethic of human sustainability at the time of adversity – Nature consoles the bereaved soul. Kalidas's attempt of keeping together Nature and man-woman in the tie of love, not in exploitation, exudes a positive vibe of sustainable development through environmental caring.

Keywords: Adiparva of Mahabharat, culture of hermitage, domestic ethics, nature, nostalgia, environmental sustainability.

Introduction :

Placed in the Pre-Christian era of 1st Century B.C., Kalidas, is recognised everywhere as a world-famous poet for the sole reason of being the composer of his drama *AbhigyanamShakuntalam*. As the legend resounds, obtaining the blessings of Goddess of knowledge, Saraswati, Kalidas is able to illumine that slight poetic talent among the people which has asserted his rights among the poet of poets. Besides the talent that he exhibits is shrouded in the mystery as because of impenetrable legends and anecdotes which can hardly be verifiable. Considering his poetic genius as the greatest of all poets in the world, there goes a Sanskrit version:

“*PuspesuyatinagarishuKanchi, narisu Rambha, puruseshuBishnu*

Nadishu Ganga, khitipeshu Rama, kabyeshu Magha kabih Kalidas”... (16)

In other words, among the flowers, Yati; among the empires, Kanchi; among the women, Rambha; among the men, Bishnu; among the rivers, Ganga; among the kings, Rama; among the poetry, Magha, thus among the poets, Kalidas is the superb and greatest for all times.

There is no doubt about it as a composer of *AbhigyanamShakuntalam*, in the version of Prof. Lassen that ‘Kalidas remains as the brightest star in the firmament of Indian poetry’. Had he composed this single play throughout his life, he could have yet remained famous for the sheer expression of his creativity as a rarest kind. Hence one critic told:

“*kabyeshuNatakamramyan, tatraramya Shakuntala*

Tatrapi cha chaturthankastatra sloka chatustayam” .. (55)

Thus, of the poetry, Nataka or Drama is the loveliest and of them, Shakuntala is the most beautiful. Therein the 4th Act is the best and finally, four slokas therein are equally the most beautiful.

Works of Kalidas :

Of his timeless creations, it can be said that, *KumarSambhava* and *Raghuvansha* emerge as the epic of highest order. Of his lyrics, *Meghaduttam*, stands out as the superb. Of his three plays, *Vikramurbashiyam* and *Malabikagnimitram* are no doubt the plays par excellence, yet his *AbhigyanamShakuntalam* is the brilliant proof of his creative talent. He has tried to exhibit through his workings the greatest human values of Indian culture. Further, his nine tenets of poetic genius have been reflected in *AbhigyanamShakuntalam*. His enemy cannot belittle his testimony of his genius as a poet.

As per the Oriental concept of theory of drama, the content of a play is borrowed from Purana or history. As Bhababhuti’s *UttarRamacharita* is taken from world famous epic – Ramayana, so also, the story concept of *AbhigyanamShakuntalam* is taken from *Adi Parva* of *Mahabharat* or *Svargakhanda* of *Padmapurana*. Of these *Mahabharat* is more ancient than *Padmapurana*. It is a full-fledged drama as its content is puranic or

myth based. As the Creative-construct of T.S. Eliot as conglomeration between individual talent and the tradition, the past with the remake of present, so also, the individual creative talent of Kalidas has given new shape to the old story as in *Mahabharat*. Old story has been redesigned with a creative shaping force. It is needless to say that the world-famous poet stands out with a newness of creative design in the same old story of Dushyanta- Shakuntala as narrated in *Mahabharat*. Though it resembles with its two myth - based twin sisters, *Abhigyanam Shakuntalam* differs from them in many respects. It aims at giving a realistic picture of life in a more marked degree than the other two.

Myth :

As the myth says in *Mahabharat*, King Dushyanta of Hastinapur of lunar dynasty as Dhiradatta genealogy losing his way in the hunting expedition of deer reaches at Kanwa's hermitage meets surprisingly Shakuntala alone, an exceedingly prettiest maiden on earth.

He has got to know from her own mouth about her descent and impatiently proposes to accept her on the *Gandharva* ritual. However, she accepts the proposal on condition that her son will be the successor to the throne after him, Dushyanta has forgot everything being physically in touch with her, suddenly prepares to leave this hermitage for his palace and later on, being afraid of public censure discards her with his son Sarvadaman, nine years later. With the intervention of heavenly voice there comes the reunion. This epic story is rough and prosaic in its treatment of theme. There are no dramatic situations and no mental conflict as the soul of drama. The characters are dull and lifeless. King Dushyanta is an opportunist in love and impatient to propose his timid heart, devoid of any ideals. Shakuntala is outspoken and lacks feminine grace and grave. Kanwa is colourless and volatile. Here, marriage seems to be a bargain. The story has a lot of absurdities and has hardly any purpose to serve. Precisely, the epic story is no story at all and a tasteless narration of a string of events. In this rough, prosaic, dull and life-less epic story, Kalidas with his skilled hand and telescopic imagination has visualised the seeds of a play of rare genius. Kalidas has done the knitting of the epic story – the love between Dushyanta and Shakuntala with an addition of *Sringara-rasa* or erotic longings for the relish of contemporary audience, has been polished, twisted with new strings, blended together with such skill that it is born to be miraculously singular. Thus, it comes out an evolution of heart-touching dramatic theme that not only delights the eye, soothes the ear and heart but also ennoble the readers by transcending them to a higher order of philosophical vision. The original myth-skeleton is added with new flesh and blood. A common theme of union-separation-reunion with a spread of seven acts has really been an uncommon with a far-reaching texture. Thus, episodic Kalidas has been metamorphosed to English Shakespeare for the sheer innovative remake of dramatic art of rare kind.

Further, going to the story of *Svarga- Khanda* of *Padmapurana* that gives the story of Shakuntala, is somewhat similar to the play of Kalidas. There are some common points where they coincide- the curse, the king, Menaka's help, the fisherman and policeman, Dhanamitra's death, Dushyanta's help to Indra, the hermitage of Maricha, the lion's cub etc. Thus, it has led the critics to believe that Kalidas is more indebted to *Padmapurana* than *Mahabharata*. The story doesnot repeat, but it is reborn with different taste in the different

hand of Kalidas. There happens many interpolations of puranic texts, but newness of Kalidas in the dramatic plot of *AbhigyanamShakuntalam* is astounding. The idea of ring that gives a surprising twist to the play like the loss of handkerchief in Shakespeare's *Othello*. This same incidence of loss of ring is found in King Pelecritus in Greek history who once lost his ring in ocean which was ultimately devoured by a fish and supposed to have been detected later on by a fisherman in the belly of a fish. Either Kalidas might have known this story or it might be completely his inventiveness. Dushyanta in Kalidas is romantic in nature, noble, responsible, righteous, self-controlled, modest in speech, polite in behaviour and tender in heart. Dull Dushyanta in Purana has been multifaceted. Backward Shakuntala in puranic text has become life of Kanwa's hermitage. She is as innocent as flower, shy in expressions, affectionate not only towards deer and flower, both flora and fauna, gifted with a high sense of self-respect, courage to suffer and a heart to forgive. The whole action of Shakuntala is spread over a period of about six years, split into the framing of seven acts. Here, love is not a mere bargain as told in original epic story, rather Kalidas in the first three acts depicts the conflicts of emotions and the gradual development of love culminating into marriage. The curse of Durvasahas changed the fate of Shakuntala and Dushyanta, but the original *Mahabharat* story has no such curse. It is the sheer innovativeness of Kalidas that brings about a chasm in the love relationship between Dushyanta and Shakuntala. Both the lovers suffer from the anguish of love for a pretty long duration. With the blessings of Gods, the lovers are united again in the sacred hermitage of Sage Maricha. Myth is brilliantly twisted in the hands of Kalidas in his *AbhigyanamShakuntalam*.

Kalidas is also indebted to Valmiki of *Ramayana* in this masterpiece. King Dushyanta is received with reverence by the forest maiden in the hermitage of Kanwa. The king feels greatly obliged and asks politely about their welfare. So also, in *Ramayana*, Sabari welcomes Rama and Lakshmana with great devotion. Rama asks Sabari similar questions about her penance. Secondly, Kalidas has borrowed many words from Valmiki's *Ramayana* that too recurs in Kalidas's *AbhigyanamShakuntalam*. The word '*Kamayamana*' has been used for love-sick Dushyanta that also occurs in relation to Rama in *Ramayana*. *AbhigyanamShakuntalam* uses '*kulankasa*' for the river because the flooded river causes the trees to being uprooted on the coasts and decays the banks. The poet compares the grief of separation with a flooded river, ruining its coasts. Similarly, Rama is also greatly afflicted in his heart with the pang:

'*sidamikhalusokenkulamtoyahatamyatha*' (25)

Thirdly, Dushyanta in his palace finds himself totally confused to take a decision about the acceptance of innocent and pregnant Shakuntala. Exactly after the return of innocent and virtuous Sita from Lanka, Rama repudiates her due to public scandal. In obedience to Rama's command, Laxman deserts her in the hermitage of Sage Valmiki. Thus, in many instances and scholarly debates, it is rightly vindicated that myth is the original source to Kalidas, masterpiece *AbhigyanamShakuntalam*.

Religion:

Religion is a belief or a set of codified principles that directs a man with dos and don'ts. It has to be followed or respected as an obedience or obligation – be it Hinduism, Christianity, Islam or Judaism, there are many instances of religion in *AbhigyanamShakuntalam* as a reflection of greater human values whose defiance has been punishable divinely. According to Hindu religion marriage is the sweetest relation between man and woman which ties them in life-long union. It is monogamy, so that husband - wife has to keep a perpetual and eternal union till death. So far as Hindu mythology is concerned, this repeats till the completion of seven births. This is sacramental. Therefore, Manu describes eight kinds of marriage in *Manusmriti*. Of them, *Brahma* is the most superior and dignified, whereas *Gandharva* takes place with the mutual consent of lovers. Manu calls this marriage is the product of *Kama*.

The lovers in the flush of passion promise in secrecy to live united life-long, without observing any ceremony. This marriage is the best practice for the *Kshyatriyas*. In *AbhigyanamShakuntalam*, we find a clear-depiction of *Gandharva* marriage. Dushyanta and Shakuntala are at their first sight bonded with this tie of *Gandharva* marriage. Therefore, Anasuya tells Priyamvada that Shakuntala was united with a worthy husband according to *Gandharva* rite.

Further, so far as the law of inheritance is concerned, Kalidas follows Kautilya's *Arthashastra*. Kautilya states that property of a person having issues from his lawful wedded wife should be divided between his sons and daughters. In *AbhigyanamShakuntalam*, Shakuntala marries Dushyanta with a condition that her unborn issue in her womb will be the right heir to throne after Dushyanta, which is too equally granted by Dushyanta.

Culture is too very much ingrained with religion. In ancient Indian culture, a guest is regarded as the oncoming of God, himself. He is the sacred fire of the householder. Kalidas follows the same custom regarding the reception of various persons as prescribed in ancient Indian culture. In *AbhigyanamShakuntalam*, the hermitage girls Anasuya, Priyamvada and Shakuntala welcome Dushyanta, the unknown visitor, respectfully. Equally, King Dushyanta receives the disciples of Sage Kanwa with great reverence. He does not care for his happiness and even at the time of rest, he welcomes them in the house of sacred fire. He leaves the capital and goes to the penance grove to pay homage to the sages. He requests or directs his Purohita *Arya Somarata* to receive the sages according to vedic rites. In accordance with the tradition, king Dushyanta asks them about the conduct of their penance, about their welfare of their teacher, Sage Kanwa.

Salutation to the sages is treated as obtaining great value. A man secures longevity, learning, glory, might and devotion to gods by proper salutation to his elders. Manu specifies this in ancient Indian Culture. In the *AbhigyanamShakuntalam*, King Dushyanta proclaims his name, pays his reverence simultaneously to the divine pair, Sage Maricha and Aditi. Shakuntala with her child prostrates herself before the sacred feet of the divine parents.

In ancient Indian culture, women held a reverend place. They had equal rights with the men. They took part in the activities of their husbands, right from domestic works to the battle field. Manu attaches great importance to the women. The gods help with blessings where women are worshipped. Thus, Manu says:

'Yatra Naryastupujyanteramantetatradevatah'

Yatretastunapujyantesarbastatrafalah :kriyah

(56)

Their curse falls upon the house where they are dishonoured. At the same time, they never live independent. In childhood, they live under the care of their parents, after marriage, they are put under the control of their husbands and later on, they are supported by their sons. Manu speaks of the same restraint and dependence of the woman. Kalidas, too, is not in favour of the independence of the women. For this very reason, in *AbhigyanamSakuntalam*, Sarngarava, a disciple of Sage Kanwa condemns and curses Shakuntala abusing her independence, proposed to marry Dushyanta. She has to suffer for her autocratic decision without the intervention of father Kanwa.

Further as a spark of the religion of household affairs, principle of chastity is too important for women. A woman is worthy to attain heaven by means of her earnest service of her husband, not by the performance of sacrifice, austerity or fast. Kalidas is too in favour of the strict observance of this principle of chastity. All his heroines undergo suffering in strict conformity to this principle of chastity. In *AbhigyanamShakuntalam*, Shakuntala is depicted as a faithful chaste wife. She practises hard penance on *Hemakuta* mountain, oblivious after the refusal of Dushyanta about their love and marriage, in order to regain her husband. Exactly in *Raghuvamsa*, Sita is presented as the chaste wife. She bears all troubles joyously during their exile and never complains. To save the illustrious tradition of her family, she leaves the royal position without grumble. She always devoutly follows the footprints of her husband Rama in weal and woe. She prays to god to make her again the devoted wife of Rama in next birth. It is quite apparent Kalidas follows this steadfast principle of religion of chastity.

Environmental Sustainability:

Reviewing the works of Kalidas, it can be clarified with facts that Kalidas always expresses himself against the backdrop of nature. Each of his particularly – *Ritusamhara* and *Meghaduta* breathes of nature. His *AbhigyanamShakuntalam*, a masterly creation of rare genius is no exception to it. It appears as if nature has entered into the bones of his lively making.

Nature plays a very important role in human life. We have our roots in nature. We flourish in its lap and at last, we take eternal rest therein. By way of this close organic relationship, nature sustains the mankind.

Going back to Indian myth, we speak with justification that *The Ramayan* and *TheMahabharat* are the first literary products in classical Sanskrit. These epics have portrayed objects of nature as they were seen by Valmiki and Vyasa, who lived in the abode of forest replete with trees and creepers, flowers and blossoms,

birds and beasts. They had full opportunity to study and appreciate the beauties of Nature. They could paint nature in their true colours. Generally, Kalidas follows the same line in the description of Nature.

Kalidas's world of nature is both beautiful and pleasant. He is a devout worshipper of Nature. Though a court poet, he has perceived Nature with a minute observation. A symbiosis of Nature and human activities as unparalleled in his work. Kalidas appreciates the tender and sweet aspect of Nature. His nature is pregnant with endless suggestion. Nature in Kalidas's work has consciousness, sensation and feeling. His dramatic characters of rich imagination like Wordsworth have close communion with Nature. His nature responds to humanity that sustains the mankind. She rejoices in man's joy and mourns in his suffering. Kalidas's literary works contain the fine ingredients of Nature such as seasons, mountains, rivers, streams, ocean, plants, creepers, blossoms, flowers, groves, gardens, forests, hermitages, dawn, dusk, day, night, sun, moon, stars, clouds, earth, sky, cities, birds and animals.

In *AbhigyanamShakuntalam*, every act except the fifth act has its setting amidst nature. In the 1st act, the black-spotted antelope, casting back its neck in fear at charioted King Dushyanta who pursuing with determination to attack, being in unison with the fast moving horse, is running fast to evade the unfortunate incident. Thus King Dushyanta enters by accident Kanwa's hermitage, where nature is sustained by the hermit dwellers. At once a voice is heard with the sheer force of protecting the inhabitants of Nature, while warring Dushyanta attempting to shoot arrow :

bhobhoRajan! Ashramamrugaye, nahantabya, nahantabya. (16)

('Oh King! This is the deer of Ashram, don't kill it, don't kill it')

Killing is not the principle here. Sustaining every creature of nature is here the ethics. Further two Baikhanas (Brahmarshis) address Dushyanta as the worthy king of *Puru* dynasty, is destined to be blessed with a son, who will be the universal monarch. Thus, it is not befitting on his part to strike arrow to a tender horse of nature like fire on a heap of flowers. The frail deer is unable to resist the sharp falling lightning arrows of Dushyanta. Hence, the relevance of value prevailed in the hermitage of Kanwa, as reflected through Kalidas is no doubt a message to the contemporary society where a Nature at every second is brutally plundered and ransacked.

Further, Sakuntala is equally both a mother and daughter to Nature. As a mother, she has affection for every tree, every creeper, for every sprout, all birds and beasts. She will not drink water without herself watering the trees, like a mother feeding a baby-child. She has '*Saudara Sneha*' for the trees. She can forget herself but not the *Navamalika* creeper. She will not pluck even tender sprout in spite of her fondness for ornaments. The flowering season of nature is a great festival for her. To her, the deer are her own children. She is anxious about the pregnant deer. She writes a love tiding to Dushyanta on lotus-leaf. She covers her breasts with lotus leaves, wears the tree-barks as garments, sleeps on a bed of flowers and wears a bracelet of lotus-stalk. Here prevails for all time an organic interdependence between man and nature and equally sustenance of nature with all value-based injunctions.

Nature is no less benevolent to return its due obligations. The 4th act in brief is an exemplary revelation of the world of nature. It is frequently quotable:

*'Kalidasasyasarbaswamabhigyanasakuntalam ,
Tatra ramyachaturthankastatraslokachatusayam'*

In other words, *AbhigyanamShakuntalam* is the best of all creations of Kalidas. In it, 4th Act is best of all acts and in too, 4 Slokas are the best of all slokas.

As Shakuntala loves nature, Nature too reciprocally returns her due. At the command of Rishi Kanwa, all the hermit dwellers make Shakuntala ready for her departure to Dushyanta's house. Flowers from the forest are collected to embellish Shakuntala. Meanwhile, two sons of sages return from the forest with a lot of gifts from the forest. Here, Nature has bounteously offered to the loving daughter Shakuntala who was day and night taking care of the trees and shrubs of Ashram. By a certain tree, she was offered a fine silk garment, white like the moon which was suited to this auspicious occasion. By another was exuded lac-dyce (lakhyarasa) for application to her feet. By some other Sylvan deities ('banadevata'), Shakuntala was presented ornaments for her wrists. Nature has no doubt a living soul like a man, who can sensibly feel the activities of men towards her, to which she duly returns considering the course of action meted out to her. This piece of fictional legendary episode has a lot of things to say about environmental sustainability.

Finally, Shakuntala is ready to leave Kanwa's Ashram forever where she was organically involved with the entire flora and fauna, birds and animals, like a doting child of forest- environment. This was almost heart-rending, when Anasuya and Priyamvada, her most intimate friends were shedding tears. Rishi Kanwa was weeping inside the heart though he had control over his passion as a perfect Yogi. It is quite natural on the part of human beings to express lamentations at the time of bidding farewell to a daughter leaving her parents house forever after marriage. However, it is unprecedented and unparalleled that all the creatures of nature have become a partaker in the farewell movement of Shakuntala. Thus, Priyambada appropriately adds to the context saying not only Shakuntala is grieved at the separation from the penance forest and the same is to be noticed in entire forest dwellers who will be detached from you forever:

'Udgalitadarvakabalahrugya:parityaktanartanamayurah

Apashrutpandupatramuchhantyasrunibalatah' (146)

At her farewell, the female deer have dropped down her cud of 'darbha' grass; the peacocks have given up their dancing and the creepers with their yellow leaves falling off as if shedding tears. To this bereaved situation, Shakuntala approaching the forest creepers tied with the mango trees, addresses them to embrace her equally with their extended ramification. She infuses life in these mute creepers like a living passionate male body. Her mother Gautami also suggests taking leave from the forest-gods with whom she developed a filial bonding for a long time. She, too, is heart-broken to see that pregnant female deer anticipating a young fawn in near future, drags her garment in unexpressed sorrow. The hind prevents her way and Shakuntala speaks in return that she cannot stay with her. She has to leave the hermitage and the pregnant deer will be

once again orphan. Father Kanwa might have taken care of her after Shakuntala's departure to Dushyanta's house forever.

There is no better proof of environmental sustainability in any other piece of world literature as this. This is a message for all time if we take care of Nature as one of our dependent family members, she will at any cost repay the debt. What better proof can there be as Kalidas has dramatised the legendary episode with multi-faceted hues of rich human values, where natural environment is the key issue.

The article, thus, with all its substantive debates and examples asserts with a force of conclusion that Kalidas's *AbhigyanamShakuntalam* is an abundant confluence of myth, religion and Nature. The more the scholar dives into, the more is there probability of getting lost in the myriad picture of myth, religion and nature. To conclude, it is not conclusive, rather an inclusive of multi-layer visions at its fathom.

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