

## RELIGIOUS AND SPIRITUAL VALUES IN KALIDASA'S *SHAKUNTALA*

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### Introduction

The origins of Asian as well as Western drama and theatre are almost invariably connected with the gods or invisible forces. Pre-modern theatre forms are also usually linked with shamanism, healing processes, and trance as well as with other ritual activities. For instance, the connection between Dionysius, the ancient fertility god, and Greek classical theatre is generally acknowledged. In the same way several examples may be cited from various Asian cultures and communities: the Chinese opera, the Japanese *Noh* theatre as well as several examples of traditional theatre in Southeast Asia which contain elements of ritual. The folk and classical traditions of Indian theatre demonstrate the same pattern.

### The *Natyasastra* and the Origins of Indian Theatre

The *Natyasastra*, the oldest classic on Indian performing arts, dated between the 2<sup>nd</sup> century B.C.E and the 2<sup>nd</sup> century C.E., is said to have been written by one Bharata Muni. It expresses the belief that the classical Indian theatre as an art form based upon religion and rituals. The evidence presented in several of its opening chapters indicates the kind of colouring that is to be found in the Sanskrit drama. The *Natyasastra*, itself has been accorded a special status, comparable with that given to the four sacred *Veda*. According to the story contained in the *Natyasastra*, on one occasion Indra and several other gods approached Brahma for a religious text suitable for members of all classes of society, including the outcast - the Untouchables (*Sudra*) - to which group undoubtedly belonged the performing arts.

These people were not allowed to read the *Veda* or even to listen to readings from those holy books. To fulfill this request Brahma created a new book, the *Natyasastra*, taking materials from the four other holy works. The gods borrowed the elements of recitative from the *Rigveda*, music from the *Samaveda*, the art of imitation or mimesis from the *Yajurveda* and *rasa* or the sentiments from the *Attharvaveda*. The combination of all these elements, in fact, resulted in the *Natyasastra*. In recognition of its status as a fifth *veda*, the new book came to be known as *Natyaveda*. Brahma presented the book to Indra. In addition, Brahma also gave guidelines for the development of plots for the dramatic, which he outlined should make use of historical tales as well as legends (*itibasa*).

With the creation of the theatre (*natya*) itself, and the *Natyasastra*, the work that would forever define and guide it, as well as the possibility of the first performance based on it, was raised. The gods should, in fact, have staged such a performance. However, they themselves lacked the capacity to bring this about. With that Brahma sought the assistance of the sage Bharata and his one hundred sons so that such a performance could be presented. Bharata was himself faced with a problem in that his troupe consisted only of his sons; it had no actresses to play the female roles. Through Indra, he once again appealed for Brahma's assistance. Brahma immediately created several nymphs (*apsara*) with the natural talent to perform dance and theatre. They were handed over to Bharata to be used as actresses in his proposed performance. Once Bharata and his troupe were adequately prepared, arrangements were made for the first performance. On the suggestion of Brahma it was scheduled to coincide with Indra's Banner Festival.

The first play staged was an enactment of an episode in which the demons (*raksaksa, daitya*) were defeated by the gods. This theme angered the demons and when they protested, Brahma tried to calm them down. In brief the god's stand was that *natya* or the drama was, in fact, a total work containing all wisdom; a representation of truth or reality:

There is no wise maxim, no learning, no art or craft. No device or action that is not found in the drama.<sup>1</sup>

In other words, in the newly created art of drama there is something for everyone, and thus everyone, even the demons, should be satisfied. It appears that the first play presented by Bharata's troupe had the same essential elements as the plays used in *Kaliattam*, an ancient art form still active in Southern India. *Kaliattam* depicts the conflict between Darika, a demon, and the goddess Kali. In the performance, Kali succeeds in killing Darika.

The second play to be performed was based on the story of the Churning of the Ocean, which was connected with the first incarnation (*avatara*) of Vishnu as a tortoise (*kurma*). It is believed that the circular movements used in this performance eventually became part of the *Raslila* theatre style. This form was developed by followers of the Bhakti movement which developed in South India in the 13<sup>th</sup> century and eventually spread to the north of the sub-continent between the 14<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries. The concept of *ras*, the opening dance section in a *Raslila* performance, is based upon the legend of the disappearance of Krishna from the cowgirls (*gopi*) and his re-emergence in his multiple images as the flute player. In the *ras* performance a lamp placed in the center of the circle of dancers represents Krishna.

According to the *Natyasastra*, the third play to be staged was *Tripuradaha* (*The Burning of the City of Tripura*). The performance, done in the Himalayas in honour of Shiva, marked the descent of theatre from the celestial regions to earth. Following that theatre became an activity for human beings. Even though this is the case, in many cultures, theatre still maintains its strong links with the sacred. In India *Ramlila* and *Raslila* are still staged to mark, respectively, the birthdays of Rama and Krishna, the two most important *avatara* of Vishnu.

From this brief history of the theatre as enunciated in the *Natyasastra*, several highly significant points emerge to give an indication of the original performance context. Firstly, it is clear that theatre and drama came about as a result of divine inspiration and origination. Secondly, the principal sources for the dramatic content came from

material connected with religion. Thirdly, the prime movers of the theatre were the gods themselves, and that they were supposed to be its first performers. However, since the gods were unable to undertake the task of actually presenting the plays, this responsibility was assigned to Bharata and his hundred sons. Fourthly, the first performance was staged on a religious occasion. Fifthly, for the earliest plays the audience consisted of the gods and other invisible being. Finally, even though the drama was intended to impart religious or moral teachings, its role as a means of entertainment was acknowledged.

Virtually the same principles are maintained in most Asian folk and classical theatre genres. The Japanese *Nob* theatre is a sacred art connected with Shintoism, and some its sacredness is retained to this day. Various forms of Chinese theatre continue to be presented in honour of ancestors and gods, if not in China proper due to the influence of Communism, at least in the Chinese communities of the Diaspora, where some form of connection between theatre and religious festivals is maintained. Many of the dance theatre forms of India derive their origins and inspiration from the kinds of materials mentioned as sources of dramatic repertoire in the *Natyastra*, and with that the original spirit and purpose of drama, essentially religious and moral in character, is still retained. These theatre forms include the highly spectacular dance-theatre forms *Kudiyattam*, *Krishnaattam*, *Ramanattam*, and *Kathakali*. In the same way, many of the older styles of traditional Southeast Asian theatre - the shadow play (*wayang kulit*) and the vast variety of proto-theatre genres, especially those of Bali in particular, may be cited as instances - still retain their connection with the invisible world.

The classical Sanskrit drama, the subject of our particular focus in this paper, came into existence and remained active between the 2<sup>nd</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> or 13<sup>th</sup> centuries C.E. Following that it declined due to several factors including cultural and political developments in the sub-continent. Available information regarding the Sanskrit drama comes principally from extant play-scripts, from books like

Bharata Muni's *Natyasastra* and Nandikesvara's *Abhinayadarpanam*, as well as commentaries on such works. Among the playwrights, Kalidasa is universally regarded as the greatest, and from amongst his works, *Abhijnana-shakuntalam*, better known to the world as *Shakuntala*, has been accorded the unquestioned distinction as the most outstanding play; to it no other bears comparison.

### The Objectives of Drama

The *Natyasastra* states the objectives of drama as being the following: the strengthening of *dharmā*, the earning of money as well as achieving a good reputation. In addition, drama must contain good advice, traditional maxims and the teaching of the *shastra*. It also must serve as a means of guidance for various arts and crafts. In other words drama makes provision for entertainment, but through it the artists also have an opportunity to show their individual talents in their respective areas of interest and specialisation - acting, dancing, music, the art of stage decoration and costume design - those elements that are indicated by the all-inclusive term *abhinaya*. Essentially the basic objectives of a performance incorporating the *abhinaya* are just two: the teaching of *dharmā* and the attainment of *rasa*. In the entire corpus of Sanskrit drama there is no play more suitable than Kalidasa's *Shakuntala* to best illustrate how these two objectives are attained.

The connection of human beings with themselves as well as the relationship between man and the invisible forces including the gods are developed as important themes in several of the classical Sanskrit plays, particularly those included in the heroic play (*nataka*) category. From the works of Bhasa, the earliest playwright, to those of the much lesser known final Sanskrit dramatists the theme of man's relationship with the gods is repeatedly given attention. This is connected with the use of myths and legends in addition to the teaching of high moral values. A large number of the plays are based upon subject matter or themes derived from the texts of the *Purana* as well as those of the epics, *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata*. Ancient myths as well as legends that were almost forgotten were given new life through

the Sanskrit drama, and given the fact that the audiences for these plays were presumably sophisticated, the quality of the plays as written works was extremely high. The productions attained levels of artistry never again reached in the entire history of Indian theatre.

To this day the connection between theatre and ritual is maintained in the form of theatre consecration rituals (*poorvaranga*) usually done before the commencement of performances. In these rituals are featured several items of paraphernalia handed over by the gods to Bharata on the occasion of the distant first performance: Indra's flag or banner, *kutilaka*, a stick used by the *vidushaka* actor, a golden bowl, an umbrella and a fan. As far as can be ascertained, this tradition of *poorvaranga* was precisely followed during the golden age of the Sanskrit theatre. Such rituals, with certain variations, can still be seen in almost all genres of Indian folk theatre as well as in theatre genres beyond the sub-continent, particularly in Southeast Asia, where Indian cultural influences are evident.

Even if the texts of the Sanskrit plays are not always sacred in character - and many of the plays are, in fact, based upon historical or legendary materials as well as upon purely imaginary materials. As is the case with Sudraka's *The Little Clay Cart* - the essential, perhaps erstwhile, sacredness of Sanskrit theatre, *qua* theatre, is confirmed by the *mantra* recited by artists before the opening of each performance; a *mantra* whose text makes reference to the four *abhinaya* while at the same time seeking Shiva's protection. The highly elaborate *poorvaranga* ceremony, maintained in particular in some of the folk genres, confirms the sacredness of the performing arts. Beyond all this, each individual play may contain additional invocations, presented by the director (*sutradhara*) to get a performance started. In the case of *Shakuntala*, the invocation goes as follows:

May Lord Shiva, endowed with eight manifests forms, protect you  
 - Water the first creation, Fire, conveying to the gods Oblations  
 offered according to ceremonial rites; The Sacrificer; time-regulating  
 Sun and Moon; Ether, with sound for its quality, pervading the

Universe, Earth, Mother of all seeds; Air, by which all creatures are blessed.<sup>2</sup>

The event to begin the performance of a play is in fact a sacred act even if over the centuries this has been altogether forgotten, except in the case of specific folk theatre forms. The objective of the performance as indicated in the *Natyasastra* is to strengthen *dharma* and to show the essence and effect of *karma*. These two themes, *dharma* and *karma*, have a central place in *Shakuntala*.

### The *Rasa* Concept

The plots of the Sanskrit plays, on the whole, are relatively simple compared to those of classical plays from the West. This is due to the difference between the theories of Sanskrit drama, with that, for instance, of Aristotle, although one is able to find resemblances between the two forms of theatre, in particular, the Greek and the Sanskrit. While the Greek drama tends to emphasise the plot designated by Aristotle as "the soul of tragedy" the emphasis in Sanskrit drama is not on action, plot nor character; the emphasis is on the ultimate effect of a play. The most important element, then, is the evocation of *rasa*. The term *rasa*, has been variously translated into English as "flavour," "desire," beauty" and that which is "tasted" or "experienced" in art. The theory of *rasa* as developed in the *Natyasastra* proposes that there are eight fundamental potential or innate emotional states, called *bhava*, within every individual:

1. Pleasure or delight (*rati*)
2. Laughter or humour (*hasa*)
3. Sorrow or pain (*soka*)
4. Heroism or courage (*utsaha*)
5. Anger (*krodha*)
6. Fear (*bhaya*)
7. Disgust (*jugupsa*)
8. Wonder (*vismaya*)

The essential qualities of these emotional states are identical in every individual because they are borne from almost identical experiences, but then there are also numerous fluctuating or transitory states or sub-states (*vibhava*) so that from time to time each of these fundamental emotions gets temporarily altered according to given circumstances and experiences (*karana*) that an individual goes through as well as the individual's reaction to those circumstances. These alterations to the emotional states are reflected in changes in facial expressions, gestures, and mental as well as physical states, which in themselves too are temporary. Those elements that bring about these changes are called *vibhava* while the result of *vibhava* is known as *anubhava*, that is, an altered emotional or physical state. With this process of change, comes about what is called *rasa*, which in effect is the final result of the whole process from the potential or dormant state to the awakened or aroused state. The eight *rasa* as stated by Bharata Muni are as follows:

1. The Erotic (*Sringara*)
2. The Comic (*Hasya*)
3. The Pathetic or Compassionate (*Karuna*)
4. The Furious (*Raudra*)
5. The Heroic (*Wira*)
6. The terrible (*Bhayanaka*)
7. The Odious (*Bibhatsa*)
8. The Marvelous (*Adbhuta*)

To these eight *rasa*, the Kashmiri philosopher Abhinavagupta, who flourished in the eleventh century added the ninth, *shanta* or the *rasa* of peace, tranquility or calmness, which unlike the other eight, is experienced by an audience member as an overall effect after he or she has witnessed a full performance. This is significant for, given Indian aesthetic and notions of performing arts, a performance is unlikely to end with any one of the other eight emotions dominating. Abhinavagupta, in fact, believed that *shanta rasa* is the beginning and end of all art. "All emotions when their exciting conditions are present, emerge from Shanta, and when these conditions are withdrawn they again emerge into Shanta."<sup>3</sup>



From the perspective of the *rasa* theory *Shakuntala* stands out as exemplary work, in the manner understood by the authors of the *Natyasastra* as well as the *Abhinayadarpanam*. At the same time, the play merits study from the point of view of its contents. Given the fact, however, that the specific focus in this paper is on the relationship between Man and some of his beliefs, the issue of *rasa* has to await another occasion. Several aspects of religion connected with the Sanskrit drama and more particularly with *Shakuntala* have already been previously stated in passing. From this point attention will be devoted only two principal themes, *karma* and *dharmā*, as manifested in this play.

### *Karma and Dharmā as Central Themes in Shakuntala*

It has repeatedly been stressed in previous studies that *Shakuntala* has love as its principal theme. *Shakuntala* is, in fact, a romantic play. It is certainly obvious that love stands out as perhaps the principal theme of the work. At the same time, however, there are evident several other important themes: heroism, the concept of an ideal king, a concept that is tied to that of *dharmā*. Then there is the theme of nature, which again is tied up with that of *dharmā*. Another outstanding theme is that of Fate or Destiny, which perhaps is better stated as that of *karma*. It is clear, then, that whichever of the play's vital issues are examined, it is impossible to escape from the spirit of religion and the two fundamental themes of *dharmā* and *karma*.

As a play *Shakuntala* is couched within the traditions of Hinduism - its mythology as well as its philosophical bases. Almost at very stage of the development, invisible beings are encountered as characters or as forces, such as the gods, that play other roles in the overall direction that the events take. In the brief episode in the Adiparva of the *Mahābhārata* upon which the play's outline is based, the play's principal characters are King Dushyanta and Shakuntala, its hero and heroine, respectively. The other characters, original creations of Kalidasa, secondary in nature, play lesser significant roles. But an unseen character, a character that is in fact totally involved in the events of

the play as they unfold is Fate, Destiny or *Karma*. True, this abstract character and others like it are not physically presented on stage as in mediaeval European theatre, but they are all the same, often represented by a voice. Indeed, even the god Indra, despite his significant role, does not make a physical appearance in the play. It appears that this method of representing the invisible, has been wisely adopted by Kalidasa, for as a purely mythological play *Shakuntala* would undoubtedly have been devoid of much of its current aesthetic merit. Several times in the unfolding of events there is a sense that what transpires before us, in fact, happens as a result of the intervention or action of a force that Man is unable to control or even to comprehend fully. The first meeting between Dushyanta and Shakuntala is an altogether unexpected one, at least on the human level. But before the encounter actually takes place, there is the highly significant statement by Dushyanta:

“Before us lie the closed portals of time.”

In reality Time and Fate, as two highly important elements in the play, determine its action. We are informed, towards the end of the play, that Father Kashyapa, also known as Kanva, who is Shakuntala's adopted father, given his spiritual powers, knew all along that the meeting between Dushyanta and Shakuntala would take place, as would their marriage. It is for this reason that when he returns to his forest hermitage from meditations in Somatirtha, Kanva is not upset that Shakuntala has submitted to the pressures exerted by Dushyanta and has married the king without his permission or blessings according to the *ghandarva* system. On the other hand, he gives thanks, and straightaway proclaims that the child to be born from this marriage will become “the glory of the world”. Much higher authority, Indra's parents, eventually confirms this.

Destiny, however, has other plans - it does not intend the relationship between Dushyanta and Shakuntala to run the normal course. Hindrances there must be, and almost immediately following the marriage the difficulties begin. The curse of Durvasas is presented in such a way that it is credible and altogether acceptable. A young

recently married woman is dreaming of her departed husband, and without even being aware of it, has failed to respond to a hermit's appeal for alms. An innocuous situation, but this represents yet another powerful manifestation of *karma*. The two young and recently married lovers are to be inevitably, cruelly separated. They are to go through a severe process of emotional and spiritual maturing before they can meet again.

This pattern of meeting, separation and reconciliation has become almost a norm in the plots of traditional Indian drama. This is true in *Shakuntala* as well as in Bhasa's *Vision of Vasavadatta*. However, Kalidasa wishes us to know that there is a higher reality at work, that the meeting, separation and reunion has been planned and executed by the gods. The separation is in fact a necessity, and there is a particular reason for it. It is required to give rise to maturity of religious faith. It is for this reason that the curse of Durvasas, once uttered, cannot be altogether revoked even upon the appeal made by Anasuya and Priyamvada, Shakuntala's closest companions. The curse, in fact, has become a tool of the invisible forces. It can only be slightly modified so that Shakuntala's suffering will get somewhat alleviated. Fate has determined that Dushyanta's all-important ring will be lost at a highly critical moment, and will be found only after the separation of the royal couple. With that and with the miraculous removal of Shakuntala to the sky country by her mother, the nymph Menaka, the first two phases of the three-part drama of meeting, separation and reconciliation, are completed, even if the effect of the separation upon Dushyanta is yet to be fully worked out. There is not a single human being in existence that is able to alter the fate of the hero and heroine. The gods themselves, who determine their fate, have, since its commencement, played out their role as agents of meeting and now of separation; the gods will continue to play their role until final and permanent union takes place.

So that the ultimate objective of the scheme may be achieved, the audience learns that the god Indra requires King Dushyanta's assistance in his war against the demons. This is something beyond

human comprehension, as is much else that transpires in the play, but this illogical development, one of many such, is once again required for the movement of the plot, and for the further unfolding of the theme of *karma*. The gods need a pretext to bring Dushyanta and Shakuntala together, and this takes the form of a war, which breaks out between Indra and the demons. It need not come as a surprise to the readers of the play that Indra is unable to defeat the *daiitya* without Dushyanta's assistance. This is something beyond comprehension, yet one accepts the situation. Dushyanta's mission is an unqualified success, and Indra is naturally grateful. On his return journey from the battlefield, passing high in the sky in Indra's chariot, Dushyanta learns that he and Matali are opportunely passing over the land of the gods. Once again, Fate intervenes. Dushyanta has the opportunity to visit the abode of Maricha and Aditi, Indra's parents, to pay his respects. Descending, he miraculously meets his infant son, Sarvadamana, as well as his estranged wife eventually.

The pattern of meeting, separation and reconciliation gets completed, but in a highly unusual situation, in an atmosphere charged with mystical and spiritual energy. This is because *Shakuntala* is not a normal tale of love. Maricha clears everything up. It is clear that Dushyanta and Shakuntala are not guilty of anything; they committed no sin. The events that transpire in Dushyanta's palace in Hastinapura, when the king refuses to accept Shakuntala as his wife, are the result of the curse of Durvasas; the result of the loss of Dushyanta's ring. The gods are aware of those events all along and the secrets that lay hidden behind them, for Durvasas is but an agent of the gods. Shakuntala is raised to the heavens to save her from a from an embarrassing and potentially disgraceful situation. This is a strange and magical development, like many others before it. Invisible voices are heard here and there around the hermitage, and the natural world is alive throughout, and is fully involved in the events. Unseen beings and even the trees present Shakuntala with marvelous clothes and jewellery at the time of her leave-taking from her village. Indeed, the atmosphere of the play is full of the miraculous - and why not when Shakuntala's very existence is the result of rather unusual

circumstances. She is no ordinary mortal but the daughter of Menaka, a nymph from Indra's heaven, and she is under the protection of heavenly beings.

Indication of the play's supernatural content is indicated throughout the work. The first act gives us information regarding the birth of Shakuntala. In the second and third acts are examples of the violent nature of the demons that try to destroy the sacred rites in Father Kanva's hermitage. In the fourth act occurs the curse of Durvasas, and there is the scene of the bestowal of unusual gifts upon Shakuntala. At the end of the fifth act Menaka descends to take Shakuntala to Mount Hemakuta, another *apsara* makes her appearance and, in the sixth act, Matali comes to lead Dushyanta to the Sky country at Indra's behest. In the seventh and final act there occurs the reunion between Dushyanta, Shakuntala, and their son in Hemakuta, in a place no less than the abode of the gods.

What is significant, however, besides the playwright's use of mythological material for dramatic purposes, is the demonstration of the fact that human life is at every moment subjected to the workings of destiny. Divine forces not just control human life; they play an active role in the life of every creature. This is clearly proven by the discussion in the final moments of the play between Dushyanta and Indra's parents. Fate is active in so many different ways, and yet, ironically, as in our own mundane reality, even those directly affected by it are unaware of its presence; nor do they fully comprehend the events that take place. Ultimately, however, the books of the gods are opened so that all may read what is inscribed in them in the boldest of prints. There are no more mysteries.

The next theme that of *dharma* should be discussed by taking into account the play's principal characters. Dushyanta in particular has often been misinterpreted as an irresponsible, even as an evil, person. He is seen as an opportunist and a rake, someone who comes into the uncorrupted setting of the rural hermitage on a hunting expedition, and who meets a young and innocent girl, Shakuntala, literally half his

age, marries her and then almost immediately leaves her without any sense of guilt or shame to return to his numerous wives in Hastinapura. And then, when Shakuntala, now pregnant with his child, is sent following much waiting and anxiety, to his palace according to time-honoured customs and traditions Dushyanta, at first, struck by her unusual beauty, is attracted to her; then he rejects her because she is pregnant, believing that she is someone else's wife. He denies having married her, or even having set his eyes on her before. This comes as a rude shock to Shakuntala, to her guardian, the elderly Gautami, and to other members of her entourage.

Despite the fact that Shakuntala is severely hurt, her attempts to convince her husband are childlike in their innocence and simplicity, her images of their meetings painted in the gentlest of words in keeping with her own essential nature. But nothing works; everything is lost. The meeting is full of violently contrasting emotions, not just those of the principal characters, but of the host of others as well - be they of the palace or of Kanva's hermitage. The king's image is seriously tarnished, and even his own courtiers are confused. Dushyanta appears to have deliberately and ruthlessly insulted Shakuntala and the accompanying hermits, even though they have approached him humbly and have given him the relevant facts: Shakuntala is his wife and, and their request is that she be received accordingly, with all due courtesy. But their appeals get nowhere, and, caught in a dilemma, they have no choice but to leave Shakuntala in the palace, as tradition demands, before returning home and leaving her to her destiny. To take her back would be an ultimate act of shame. Within the court itself, a compromise is finally achieved. Shakuntala is to stay in the palace until the birth of her child, but not as Dushyanta's wife. The birth of her child would, it is expected, resolve the issue of whether or not the king did marry her. This, of course, does not happen, and Shakuntala, is insulted and prays for death when the heavens literally open to accept her. Her sincerity is confirmed, but her physical disappearance complicates the play's plot.

The original story as it appears in the *Adiparva* section of the *Mahabharata*, which may have been one of Kalidasa's sources, does

not feature those elements in Kalidasa's piece, which make it so refined. Dushyanta indeed rejects Shakuntala who appears before him nine years after the marriage with their son, only to be rejected. There seems to be no real justification on the part of Dushyanta for rejecting Shakuntala except, perhaps for his fear of ridicule or timidity. If these events did in fact take place under normal circumstances an unsympathetic conclusion regarding Dushyanta's character would have been a perfectly legitimate one. But we are able to altogether wipe out any misunderstanding regarding the king's conduct by keeping in mind two things in connection with the play. Firstly, Kalidasa's aim is to represent Dushyanta as a pious individual, as well as an ideal king. Secondly, destiny has played a significant role. Dushyanta's situation as well as his conduct is beyond his own control, as are those of Shakuntala. Both of them voice the feeling that they themselves do not altogether understand what is happening; why they have to go through such intense suffering that, seemingly, destiny has prepared for them.

The concept of Dushyanta as an ideal king, who is religious, defender of the customary laws of religion, and protector of the weak and humble, is quite clear from comments by other characters about him. When the king emerges on the stage for the very first time we see him as heroic and noble. To his charioteer Dushyanta is the veritable Shiva rather than an ordinary mortal going to the hunt. In fact, Dushyanta is a manifestation of the *devaraja*, the king who is the earthly symbol of the gods. His refinement as a person is constantly referred to. He enters Kanva's hermitage as a humble devotee in such a manner demonstrating his respect for the place and its occupants, replacing his royal garments, with humble attire so much so that he is, in fact, not even recognised by the occupants of the hermitage. All of this, of course, serves Kalidasa's dramatic purpose; it allows for the events to unfold in the best possible way so as to achieve the play's thematic as well as aesthetic objectives. At the hermitage Dushyanta's is the heroic strength that drives away powerful evil forces so that the rites of the hermits can be appropriately carried out. For the purpose of maintaining continuing peace and order he is forced to delay his return to Hastinapura when he sees the potential dangers from the "flesh-

eatery." Certainly this delay is connected with a desire to spend more time with his beloved. Once again Kalidasa's dramatic genius takes the opportunity to get Mathavya out of the way so that the play's plot can work.

It cannot be denied that Dushyanta acts in a totally responsible manner, as king, defender of the faith, and even Shakuntala's admirer. Another aspect of Dushyanta's character that comes through is his role as a devoted son to his mother: someone fair and just to his many wives, and someone who cares for his friends, as indicated by his relationship with Mathavya and his subjects. In short, Kalidasa has developed Dushyanta as a king who upholds *dharma* and who, as a person, is ever conscious of duty.

In the same way, Shakuntala is shown as an ideal heroine: innocent, a beauty comparable to an angel or nymph, a girl on the threshold of adulthood like a flower impatient to bloom into maturity. There is nothing in Dushyanta's or Shakuntala's behaviour that may be regarded in an unfavourable light when they first meet, in circumstances that are equally perfect, if at times contrived. This meeting gives rise to feelings of mutual attraction, which develop into love and soon lead to marriage. The incident that becomes the source of tragedy in the lives of these two principal characters of the play is when the terrible curse of Durvasas is uttered merely because Shakuntala has failed to entertain the sage, should however, not be viewed as something negative. Even though it is somewhat reduced it still has serious consequences and in the structure of the play it has an important dramatic function, thus allowing for the development of the various religious themes. The impending marriage initially gives rise to feelings of discomfort in Shakuntala principally because her father is not in the hermitage to bless the union and to conduct the marriage ceremonies himself. Her mind is cleared following Dushyanta's explanation, and Kanva's acceptance of the marriage clears any remaining doubts and uncertainties. Everything is done according to principles sanctioned by religion.



And then comes the tragic separation. Before they meet again in the final act of the play, both Dushyanta and Shakuntala experience a range of difficulties, emotional as well as psychological. Shakuntala, fully in touch with what is happening to Dushyanta, suffers by proxy for him rather than for herself. Unlike Dushyanta, she has the advantage of knowledge, happening on dimensions, the material and the spiritual. Dushyanta, cast in the dark cloud of ignorance as well as guilt, suffers more intensely. Some but not all of Dushyanta's suffering is witnessed by Mathavya, the *visudhaka*, more of a brother to Dushyanta than a mere palace official, but like others around Dushyanta at this time, he unable to assist. Sanumati witnesses Dushyanta's sufferings as representative of Menaka and Shakuntala. She is able to convey to Shakuntala the extent of Dushyanta's agony. Through these two characters, Mathavya and Sanumati, a picture of Dushyanta's extreme sadness emerges. We do not see Shakuntala on stage for some time, but an indication of her situation emerges through Sanumati. Shakuntala now leads the lonely life of an ascetic, a sort of foreshadowing of what lies in her future beyond the actual limits of the play's extent. This is a great challenge given that she is still very young and that she has only recently married the king. Both of these portrayals of sadness arouse an atmosphere at once serious and hauntingly spiritual.

The king's heroism, his bravery and his physical prowess are reaffirmed in the battle between Indra and the demons in which he participates. This battle, too, is a symbol, and an important one, for the battle is once again not only physical. In reality, Dushyanta's struggle is one against the negative forces or the demons within himself. This is a psychological and spiritual battle, and, in the end, Dushyanta successfully overcomes his own weaknesses. With that he emerges as a new person, fully cleansed from materialism and he is now qualified to go directly into *moksha*. His situation parallels that of Shakuntala. Her suffering gives rise to a woman who is pure, confident and calm, looking ahead for the future, not just the future in Dushyanta's palace or even at the hermitage of her father to which she and her husband will retire, but to a future beyond all the cycles of time and beyond all the incarnations.

The spiritual journey made between the first act of the play and the final is an immense one, even if in terms of earthly reality the time taken has been few brief years. The limited words given to Shakuntala are insufficient to demonstrate the powerful emotions within her, but what she says is sufficient. Shakuntala surrenders herself to her husband with just one brief, simple sentence: "Victory to my Lord." There is no need for questions; there is no need to seek explanations from Dushyanta regarding his apparently unjust conduct towards her. There is no need either for him to affirm that he still loves her. Her husband is a god. The baser emotions have been left behind. However, before the newly reunited king and his wife leave for home, to clear their confusion regarding the cause of their separation - they are as yet unaware of the curse of Durvasas, and of the roles the gods have played in their lives - their ignorance is removed by Maricha and Aditi. Their son's future as a great king is assured. The play comes to a close on a note of tranquility and equilibrium, *shanta rasa*.

Long before we arrive at this moment in the play when Shakuntala leaves the hermitage in the first act, she asks Father Kanva: "When will I return to this place?" Kanva's reply prefigures, in a sense, the final lines of the play. The return to the hermitage will take place when Dushyanta's son with Shakuntala has taken over the burdens of kingship. Yet this return to the hermitage will be but a symbol of a far greater, an infinitely more meaningful return - a return to the lap of Eternity. The desired final achievement of every soul is to step off the cycles of reincarnation, so as not to return into this mundane reality, not to experience again the joys and sorrows of being born, even as a human being. What is desired is infinity, perpetual peace that awaits everyone who follows the path of *dharma*. This is the desire expressed by Dushyanta in the final words of the play.

The events experienced by Man in his life are determined by a greater power, Fate. With that the question of the freedom of Man to determine anything about himself does not arise at all. Furthermore, the purpose of existence, according to the Hindu philosophy, is to attain *moksha*.

Kalidasa's *Shakuntala* demonstrates the ripening of the human spirit, which, from a simple state evolves into a metaphysical level in the rediscovery of man's true cosmic nature. It is but a return, and when this has been achieved, nothing else has any meaning. What else can one desire?

And may the purple self-existent god  
Whose vital energy pervades the universe  
From further incarnations save my soul.

Seen from this point of view, it can be established that even though love is at first sight an obvious and seemingly dominant theme of Kalidasa's play, *Shakuntala* is a work of art that transcends the theme of love, love between a pair of mortals and in this case a king and an innocent village lass. This can be seen from the discussion, attempted above, of what are possibly some, but certainly not all of the play's more significant themes; themes which ultimately are derived from certain philosophical foundations of Hinduism, but which, nevertheless, are in essence the heritage of Mankind.

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