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An analytical study of Abhijnana Sakuntalam of Kalidasa

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Abstract

The “Abhijnana Sakuntalam” is the best play written by Kalidasa, one of the greatest poets of India. The story of the play 'Abhijnana Sakuntalam' is taken from Shakuntalopakhyaana of Mahabharata Adi Parva (Chapter 70-74) written by Maharshi Vyasdev. It consist of seven acts. The love story of King Dushyanta and Sakuntala is the main subtext of this play. Dushyanta is the king of Hastinapur and Sakuntala is a beautiful woman, the daughter of Sage Vishwamitra and Apsara Menaka.

Keyword: Love, ashrama, apsara, Vidushaka, demons

Introduction

The Abhijnana-Sakuntalam is a Nataka in seven Acts, based on the well-known love story of king Dushyanta and maiden Sakuntala, as given in the ancient Indian epic, the Mahabharata. Dushyanta is a king of Hastinapur and Sakuntala is a beautiful woman, the daughter of Sage Vishwamitra and Apsara Menaka. Sakuntala has grown up in the ashrama of sage Kanva since she was disposed by her birth parents. The scene of the first four Acts were laid at Kanva's ashrama at the foot of Himalayas. Later, in fifth and sixth act, it shifted to the capital, Hastinapura and finally to Maricha's ashrama on the Hemkuta mountain.

In first act, while the king Dushyanta was about to shoot a deer, he was interrupted by an ascetic informing that the animal belongs to the asrama of Kanva and the sanctity of place must not be violated by its slaughter. At the ascetics urging, Dushyanta decides to go to the asrama of Kanva, to pay his respect as well enjoy the hospitality offered there. When the king's right arm was trembling, he entered the ashram thinking about the possibility of getting a wife. In the asrama, he found three girls of exquisite loveliness, watering the flowering plants and shrubs. One was Sakuntala, daughter of Sage Kanva and the other two being her companions, Angrira and Priyambada. Dushyanta and Sakuntala felt attracted to each other at first sight and this did not go unnoticed by Sakuntala's friends. In the course of the general conversation, he learnt that Sakuntala is Kanva's adopted daughter, being born of Menaka by Visvamitra. In the meanwhile, news came of an elephant causing damage and the King departed.

In the second act, King Dushyanta was presented in a love-sick condition. The Vidushaka, the companion of King, the privileged court-jester was trying to divert his royal master's mind. The King first of all directed his General to stop the chase and to order his followers not to disturb the ashrama. After then he acquainted the Vidushaka with his having fallen in love at first sight with Sakuntala. The King asked Vidushaka to find out some way by which he can manage to stay in the asrama without arousing comment or suspicion. Their conversation was interrupted by the arrival of two ascetics who requested Dushyanta to protect their sacred rites from demons bent on disturbing them. Dushyanta readily agrees as it complements his desire to visit the asrama without arousing any suspicion. However, his joy was cut short by the arrival of Karabhaka with a message from the Royal Mother asking for his immediate return to Hastinapur. Torn between his duty towards the ascetics and his mother, Dushyanta finally decides to go to the ashrama and sends Vidushaka in his stead to Hastinapur.

In the 3rd act, Sakuntala was actually shown to be suffering from lovesickness, unable to keep Dushyanta out of her thoughts, she longs for his company. Her two companions, Priyamvada and Anasuya tried to calm her. King Dushyanta arrived at the bower where the three women were resting and on hearing Sakuntala confess her love for him, reveal himself to them. Sakuntala's companions left the two lovers alone and in the process king Dushyanta tried to

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woo Sakuntala. However, their love play is interrupted by the arrival of elderly relatives, Gautami and the lovers separated. The King Dushyanta also went out and engaged in fight the demons tormenting the ascetics.

In the fourth act, Dushyanta has married Sakuntala by the gandharva form of marriage and has left for the capital, having promised to send a suitable guard to take his bride to Dushyanta's palace. While Sakuntala is alone in the ashrama, her thoughts being away with her absent husband, she fails to offer proper hospitality to the choleric sage, Durvasas who came to the asrama as a guest. The hot-tempered sage curses her with the words- "He of whom you are thinking, neglecting to receive me properly as a guest- he won't remember you even when reminded (of you)". Anasuya, one of Sakuntala's companions, however, plead Sakuntala's absent-mindedness, and obtained from the sage forgiveness and concession in so far that, the curse would cease to have effect on the production of some token of recognition. The two companions say nothing about the curse to anyone. They did not communicate it even to Sakuntala, as they thought it was not advisable to worry her with it and especially as some token of recognition could easily be produced when the occasion needed it. Sage Kanva came to know of Sakuntala's marriage and that he had approved of it. In the meanwhile the curse had begun to operate and Dushyanta had completely forgotten everything about his forest-bride. But those in the ashrama are not aware of that and as Sakuntala as by this time developed signs of pregnancy they were preparing to send her to her lawful husband. Sakuntala's departure from the ashrama is poignantly described. Everyone is filled with sorrow seeing her leave even the plants and animals forsake their natural routines and grieve her absence from the holy Grove. As Shakuntala bids farewell to her home and embraces her family and friends for the last time, Kanva instructed her on her duty to the King and other's at the palace. It contained also Kanva's well-known advice to Sakuntala on the duties of a wife and daughter-in-law.

In the fifth act, the scene shifted to Dushyanta's capital. The ascetics escorting Sakuntala, arrive at the royal palace and wish to see the King who having forgotten everything, calmly ordered his chamberlain to admit the party into his royal presence. After an exchange of greetings, Sarrigarava, the chief of the sages that accompanied Sakuntala, congratulated the king on his marriage, and invited him to accept his wife as the Queen. The King, to whom all this comes as a complete surprise, denied all knowledge of the affair and even Sakuntala fails to rouse his curse-swept memory. As a last resort she wanted to show him his ring, which he had given her at parting and which would have been a sure token, but as ill-luck would have it, it had slipped off her fingers during the journey. Mutual recriminations lead to nothing and she and her party left the audience-hall. Outside, while she was bemoaning her fate, a celestial lady descended from heaven and carries her away. The King and his courtiers were astonished at this superhuman intervention, which however they were unable to explain and the curtain drops, leaving the King musing in a gloom of vexatious uncertainty.

In the sixth act, the ring which Sakuntala had dropped in a pool of water on her journey was discovered inside a fish by a fisherman, whom the police accused of theft and took him to the King for being properly dealt with. He was of course let off by Dushyanta, who, at the sight of that token of recognition, was freed from the influence of sage Durvasas' curse and then distinctly remembered his marriage with the repudiated Sakuntala and all the details connected with it. He

was deeply grieved, but was helpless. He was closely followed in the course of his sorrow by Sanumati, who was interested in Sakuntala, owing to her connexion with Menaka, Sakuntala's mother. The King seek to divert his mind in the in the company of his confidant, the Vidushaka, but at every moment he finds his grief harrowing deep down into his soul. And to make matters worse, he received a letter from his minister, announcing the death of merchant named Dhanamitra, who dies sonless and whose property, consequently, goes to the royal treasury. This lead him to reflect pensively on his own sonless state, until the grief caused thereby makes him unconscious. A welcome diversion was created at this time by Matali, Indra's charioteer, who arrived with a message from his master to Dushyanta to come and proceed forthwith to do battle with certain troublesome demons, the enemies of the King of gods. Dushyanta agreed and left in Indra's car to proceed on his expedition.

In the seventh act, the King was successful in his expedition and was dismissed by Indra after being received with extra ordinary honour. While returning through the sky in the car driven by Matali, he alights on the Hemakuta mountain where the holy sage Kasyapa (Maricha) resided and whome the King wanted to salute reverently on his way. He goes to the ashrama. While Matali was gone to seek Kasyapa, King Dushyanta came across a young boy, the very image of himself, playing with a lion's cub. At his sight the King experienced a strange emotion as though the boy were his own son. It gradually comes out in the course of talk with the boy's attendant females that he belongs to the Puru race (Dushyanta's own race) and that his mother's name is Sakuntala. The King suspected the truth that most likely the boy is his own son. It was confirmed by the entrance of Sakuntala herself who recognized her lord. Mutual explanations follow and the pair was reconciled. Kasyapa then enters. He explained the incident of curse and how it clouded Dushyanta's memory, so that the repudiation was not the King's fault. He pronounced his blessing on the couple and sends them off together with their son in that same car of Indra to their capital where they live ever happily.

We have learnt the lesson from the Abhijnana Sakuntalam that no matter what life throws at us, we should never lose hope.

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