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## The relevance of kanchuki: Unveiling from Abhijnana Shakuntalam

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### Abstract

Kalidasa, a prominent figure in Sanskrit literature, is renowned for his distinct contribution to the 'Vedarvimarg'. His work 'Abhijnana Shakuntalam' is widely regarded as a masterpiece, representing the 'Reconciliation Drama'. Kalidasa's adept use of romantic sentiment sets him apart, as he conveys a notion of love that transcends the ordinary and realistic. His portrayal of the concept of attaining love through asceticism distinguishes him and prompts comparison to Shakespeare. Despite the presence of desire within love, Kalidasa skilfully depicts the challenges associated with achieving it under a curse. The character 'Kanchuki' serves as a prime example of this curse, portrayed as a flawed yet knowledgeable royal servant. Consequently, Shakuntala embodies renunciation due to Kanchuki's discernment and unwavering sense of duty.

**Keyword:** Abhijnana shakuntalam, drama, kalidasa, kanchuki

### Introduction

Within the vast expanse of Sahitya Shastra, two fundamental divisions come to light: visual poetry and auditory poetry (Sreekantaiya & Srikanthayya, 2001). Visual poetry, also known as 'Rupaka' as 'form' is imposed on this 'visual poetry'. (Kheera, 2023), which was, succinctly captured in the adage 'तद् रूपरोपातु रूपकम्' (Mandal, 2018). This *Rupaka* unfolds into ten distinct segments, where drama holding a preeminent position.

नाटकमथ प्रकरणं भाणव्यायोगसमवकारडिमाः।

ईहामृगांकवीथ्यः प्रहसनमिति रूपकानि दश"॥

(साहित्यदर्पणम्, ६.३., पृ. २३९)

In this diverse landscape of dramatic works, Kalidasa's 'Abhijnana Shakuntalam' emerges as a noteworthy masterpiece (Vemsani, 2021) <sup>[13]</sup>. The heart of the play delves into the profound theme of the 'Curse of Durvasa', a narrative thread woven through the actions of a humble royal servant toiling within the confines of King *Dushmanta's* palace. Guided by the Kanchuki, this servant becomes the conduit for the manifestation of Durvasa's curse. Consequently, the sixth and seventh acts of the play unravel significant transformations in the characters of King *Dushmanta* and King *Duhita Shakuntala*.

### 2. The position of Kanchuki in Sanskrit dramatic characters

In the realm of Sanskrit drama, a rich tapestry of character archetypes unfolds, each contributing to a dynamic interplay between central figures and supporting cast members. Ancient Sanskrit dramas predominantly grace the opulent settings of royal palaces or unfold within aristocratic lineages (Shekhar, 1960) <sup>[11]</sup>. The eminent poet Kalidasa, celebrated for his profound contributions to Sanskrit literature, crafts narratives that find their essence in regal households, exemplified by works such as *Malvikagnimitram* and *Vikramorvashyam*. Within this ensemble of characters affiliated with majestic lineages, the role of Kanchuki assumes a pronounced significance.

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While Kanchuki may not command the spotlight as a principal character, the unmistakable influence the character wields on the narrative's progression and resolution is noteworthy. Positioned as a minor attendant in the royal palace, Kanchuki emerges as a pivotal force shaping the unfolding drama.

"आचार इत्यवहितेन मया गृहीता  
या वेत्रयष्टिरोधगृहेषु राज्ञः  
काले गते बहुतिथे मम सैव जाता  
प्रस्थानविकलवगतेरवलम्बनार्था"॥  
(अभिज्ञानशाकुन्तलम्, ५.३., पृ. ३१४)

This exploration delves into the nuanced relevance of Kanchuki in the context of *Abhijnana Shakuntalam*, contributing to our understanding of the intricate dynamics within Sanskrit dramatic traditions, suitable for consideration in the esteemed pages of the Indian Journal.

### 3. The significance of Kanchuki

Within the landscape of Sanskrit drama, characterized by distinct gender roles, namely male and female characters, certain prominent figures like kings, prime ministers, and queens typically claim the spotlight. However, alongside these dominant personas, there exist less conspicuous yet pivotal characters who contribute significantly to the narrative trajectory. Kanchuki, in this context, emerges as one such character.

The term "*Kanchuki*," derived from the English word "*Cloak*" (Mukhopadhyay, 2018) <sup>[8]</sup>, finds its linguistic roots in the first singular form of the Sanskrit word "*Kanchukin*" (Bhattacharya, 2019) <sup>[1]</sup>. They are given this designation because of the unique attire they wear (Mukhopadhyay, 2018) <sup>[8]</sup>.

**This character exhibits distinct attributes, such as being:-**

- Brahman by Caste.
- Masculine in gender.
- Ranging in age from middle to old age (Mansinha, 1962) <sup>[7]</sup>.
- Professionally designated as an advisor and personal attendant to lords or kings who were regarded as among the list of import civil officers like Rajapurusha, Rajanyaka, Rajamatya, Mahasamanta etc.
- Kanchuki operates as a crucial intermediary, often acting as a '*Chamberlain*' responsible for conveying decisions between the king and council. Whatever the decisions were arrived at the king from council were conveyed by him through Amatya (Mahajan, 1962) <sup>[5]</sup>. He also does the same things for Raj Anthapuri. Along with that they also act as an interpreter, informer and transmitter for Raj Anthapuri or Queen (Mansinha, 1962) <sup>[7]</sup>.
- Furthermore, Kanchuki assumes roles beyond mere communication, occasionally taking on the mantle of a supervisor or chief organizer of cultural events, as seen in '*Malavikagnimitra*,' where he orchestrates a dance competition (Deb, 2017) <sup>[2]</sup>.

Despite being an outsider to the royal family, Kanchuki possesses an intricate understanding of the rules, regulations, and restrictions governing the royal household, making him a reliable transmitter of information and interpreter of the socio-cultural landscape (Sharma, 2008) <sup>[10]</sup>. His role extends

beyond the confines of the royal court, encompassing a nuanced awareness of prevailing politics, both within the capital and throughout the broader realm. In essence, Kanchuki's multifaceted role adds layers of depth to the intricate socio-political tapestry depicted in Sanskrit dramas.

### 4. The Curse of Durvasa

The Curse of sage *Durvasa* emerges as a distinctive hallmark within Kalidasa's *Navaras Ruchira Pratibha*, notably resonating in the narrative framework of *Abhijnana Shakuntalam*. In the absence of *Kanva* at *Tapavan*, Shakuntala is entrusted with the responsibility of guest service. However, immersed in contemplation of her husband Pati, she inadvertently forgets her duty. This narrative incident underscores a profound theme the potential pollution of even the purest love when it conflicts with the discharge of societal obligations. The query arises: If Shakuntala, a married woman, prioritizes personal interests at the expense of societal duties, how can she effectively uphold the responsibilities befitting the role of *Rajmahishi*? Consequently, as a punitive measure for the impropriety in her conduct, a curse befalls the contemplative Shakuntala, leaving an indelible mark on the unfolding drama.

विचान्तयन्ती यमनन्यमानसा  
तपोधनं वेत्ति न मामुपस्थितम्  
स्मरिष्यति त्वां न स बोधितोऽपि सन्  
कथां प्रमत्तः प्रथमं कृतमिवा।  
(अभिज्ञानशाकुन्तलम्, ४.१., पृ. २३६)

In a parallel manifestation of nobility and restraint, King Dushyanta, while largely virtuous, succumbs to indiscretions in his longing to reunite with Shakuntala after their initial encounter. Consequently, he, too, becomes ensnared by a curse, marking a social imperative rather than a mere punitive measure. The intricacies of societal norms often demand a conduit through which these dictates are enforced. In the unfolding drama, Kanchuki assumes the pivotal role of embodying and enforcing this social decree, explicating the importance of adhering to societal duties for both Shakuntala and Dushmanta. The narrative unfolds as a reflection of societal rules, wherein both protagonists transgressed by yielding to desire, neglecting their familial responsibilities. Shakuntala, inherently ascetic, found herself caught between the societal norms of sacrifice and the allure of desire, thereby challenging the sanctity of Tapobana. Furthermore, Dushmanta, entrusted as the protector of Tapobana, faltered in upholding his honor and duty, succumbing to the enticements of lust. The resultant curse becomes a transformative force, shaping Shakuntala into an ideal woman and molding King Dushmanta into a dutiful *Rajashri*, illustrating the profound impact of societal expectations on individual character trajectories.

### 5. The responsibilities of Kanchuki

The responsibilities of Kanchuki unfold across the three distinct acts of the *Abhijnana Shakuntalam* play. Act I is set in Maharishi Karna's Ashram, Tapovan, situated on the banks of the Malini River. Act II delves into the Hastinapur kingdom, intricately exploring the dynamics of the royal family, customs, and culture. Act III unfolds at the Ashram of Rishi Marich on Hemkoot Mountain.

In the initial act, Shakuntala incurs a curse; in the subsequent segment, the curse materializes; and in the concluding act, the

curse finds resolution. Kanchuki, a royal servant closely associated with the royal family in Hastinapur, assumes a pivotal role in the manifestation of Shakuntala's curse within the royal palace.

Kanchuki's character is significantly shaped by the weighty responsibilities vested in him by the royal family. In the unfolding drama of Abhijanan's Shakuntalashakuntalam, the manifestation of Shakuntala's curse is attributed to Kanchuki's unwavering dedication to duty. This is exemplified when Gautami, Shangrava, and Sharaddhat arrive at the royal palace in Hastinapur with Shakuntala from Kanbar's hermitage. At this crucial juncture, the king, having recently left the royal court, retires to Antapura for rest. Kanchuki's duty necessitates the prompt conveyance of this news to the king. The decisive nature of his actions becomes apparent, as had Kanchuki delayed even momentarily after the king's retreat, the curse might not have materialized. This pivotal moment is underscored the following day at dawn, the beginning of the sixth sequence, when the king, through the Dhivar vrantanta, discovers his signet ring and immediately recalls Shakuntala's words. Kanchuki's unwavering commitment to his duty is evident as he fulfills his responsibilities without the slightest neglect, embodying a character marked by diligence and conscientiousness. But Kanchuki did not neglect his duty in the slightest and he felt that.

“भानुः सकृद्युक्ततुरङ्ग एव  
रात्रिन्दिवं गन्धवहः प्रयाति।  
शेषः सदैवाहितभूमिभारः  
षष्ठांशवृत्तेरपि धर्म एषः”॥

(अभिज्ञानशाकुन्तलम्, ५.४., पृ. ३१४)

Due to Kanchuki's unwavering commitment to duty, Shakuntala encountered the king before presenting the ring to Dhivar, resulting in the king disowning Shakuntala. The curse served as the mechanism for her release "अभिज्ञानाभरणदर्शनेन शापो निवर्तित्यतः"। (अभिज्ञानशाकुन्तलम्, चतुर्थ अङ्कः, पृ. २३८)

Due to Kanchuki's conscientiousness regarding his duties, he was cognizant of the king's faith. Actively safeguarding both faiths, an enduring sacred love story unfolded as a result, beautifully depicted through this play.

## 6. Conclusion

Drama, as a form of visual poetry, wields a profound impact on society. The influence of drama is heightened among ordinary individuals, who experience Natyaras through sight and sound, intensifying its emotional resonance. Furthermore, drama serves as a vehicle for character emulation. Works like Ramayana, Mahabharata, and various narratives employ character imitation to impart moral lessons and virtues to the general populace. Consequently, the assembly of diverse roles is evident in this play, featuring main characters, minor characters, and others who actively contribute to societal welfare. Kanchuki, a minor male character in Kalidasa's play Abhishanashakuntalam, plays a pivotal role in achieving narrative completeness. Maharishi Durvasa's irate disposition, coupled with the unerring nature of his words as a Siddha Purusha, is instrumental. Kanchuki, as King Dushmanta's royal servant, not only facilitates the manifestation of Rishi Durvasa's curse but also catalyzes a transformative journey for King Dushmanta and Shakuntala, imbuing them with the virtues of a Siddha Purusha. The multifaceted impact of drama is thus eloquently demonstrated through the nuanced

interplay of characters and the moral lessons conveyed in this play.

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