

Abhijnanasakuntalam: A Summary of epic poet Kalidasa's play

Abhijnanasakuntalam, famously known as “The Recognition of Sakuntala” (through a token) was the first ever translation made of an Indian play into Western languages. This brilliant tale of romance and emotions attracted William Jones so much that he translated the play in English during the year 1789 and the tradition of translating the work of Kalidasa is continuing even today.

The play was not composed entirely in Sanskrit and contains elements of a Middle Indian dialect known as Maharashtri Prakrit. There is no certainty about the exact timeline or period in which the play of Kalidasa is written. The reason behind this uncertainty is due to the fact that there is no historical evidence about when Kalidasa was born and the period of his lifetime varies from 2nd century B.C to 4th century A.D.

About the play:

The roots of the play are taken from the Indian epic “Mahabharata” and several changes were made to derive dramatic effects and they all worked. As a result, most people consider the version of the origin of Bharata, misfortunes of Sakuntala and the story of Dushyanta by Kalidasa in Abhijnanasakuntalam is authentic. The plot revolves around Sakuntala, the daughter of the great saint Viswamithra and the heavenly damsel Menaka. Viswamithra in order to gain great rewards gets into deep meditation and the lord of heavens, Indra gets worried about his predicament if the saint completes his meditation. To save his position and be worshipped as the one with no equal, Indra sends Menaka to lure Viswamithra out of his contemplation to God.

After many efforts Menaka successfully disturbs the firm mind of the saint and he falls in love with the beauty of the damsel. As a result, Sakuntala (the name is given by the sage Kanva) is born and Viswamithra realizes what he has lost due to the union and rejects to be with Menaka and Sakuntala. Menaka is forbidden to enter Heaven with a human child so she leaves her daughter in a forest knowing well that the forest is under the protection of Kanva and he will take care of her. As expected by Menaka, Kanva finds the baby girl surrounded by birds called Shakunta, thus he names her as Sakuntala as she was seen with the birds who seem to enjoy playing with her. When the play Abhijnanasakuntalam opens, Sakuntala is seen in her youth with graceful mind and body.

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 – I or The Chase (Scene: The forest and then hermitage):

Dushyanta, the king of Hasthinapura tries to capture a deer and is seen on his chariot when a hermit intervenes and warns that the place is under the protection of a hermitage and any animal that enters the place shall not be harmed. The King honours the words of the hermit and withdraws his arrow and puts it back into the quiver. The Hermit blesses the king with a boon to have a noble son and asks him to visit the hermitage of Kanva. Dushyanta is knowledgeable enough to know that a hermitage should be entered with all the modesty; therefore he asks the charioteer Suta to halt, removes all his jewels and Kingly costumes to appear like a normal individual. As he takes steps forward, he hears the sound of hermit girls and is taken away by the beauty of them. So, he decides to hide behind a tree and observe them.

Sakuntala, Priyamvada and Anasuya converse with each other while a bee troubles Sakuntala and the admiring Dushyanta is comes out from hiding to save her from the foraging thief. At first, Sakuntala gets scared of seeing a man who doesn't belong to the hermitage and runs away. Dushyanta reveals his true identity and is graciously invited to the hermitage. Sakuntala falls in love with the king as his delightful words and his face attract her very much. Dushyanta gives his ring to Sakuntala as a token. The King leaves the serene hermitage as the soldiers approach with loud shouts.

Act – II or Concealment of the telling (Scene: The Forest):

Madhavya, the court-jester and a close companion to Dushyanta is seen complaining about his ill-fate having to wander the forest and eat on everything he could get instead of rejoicing in the palace. He tries to show his frustrations when the king meets him; however, Dushyanta consoles him and makes him to agree to help. They conspire together so that Dushyanta can get as close as possible to the beautiful Sakuntala. Dushyanta is reminded of the fast done by his mother and the oath he took to participate on the last day. At the crossroads, unable to decide whether to fulfil the oath or carry on with his heart's renderings Dushyanta sends Madhavya to the King's palace as his younger brother so that he could get closer to Sakuntala.

Act – III or Love's fruition (Scene: The hermitage of Kanva):

The king couldn't resist himself from returning to the hermitage to see Sakuntala and as he enters speaking of the charm Sakuntala possesses, she and her friends enter talking in a flirtatious manner. He hides and watches them as they speak in that manner and Sakuntala begins to sing of love. Dushyanta comes out of hiding, unable to subdue his heart's cravings due to the influence of the poem. The four of them talk and gradually Priyamvada and Anasuya slip away leaving the pair in solitary independence.

As their hearts drizzle with thoughts of lover's flirtations and they get closer with each conversation, from a distance the voice of Gautami is heard calling for Sakuntala. The pair separate with regret and Sakuntala leaves with Gautami whereas Dushyanta leaves to help the ascetics complete the evening prayers.

Act – IV or Sakuntala’s departure (Scene: The hermitage of Kanva):

From the conversation of Anasuya and Priyamvada it is revealed that Dushyanta and Sakuntala are married and they talk of the king returning to his capital, perplexity over fulfilling his promise to Sakuntala, Kanva’s reaction to the union, etc. However, they conclude that everything will go just right as they hear a voice announcing himself at the hermitage while they’re picking flowers. Knowing of the uncertain state of Sakuntala who is know always thinking of Dushyanta hurry back to see if she has properly received the guest.

The guest is Durvasa – a great saint with intense anger. He becomes frustrated to see Sakuntala not receiving him properly and curses her thus:

*“You who do not notice me,
A hoard of holy merit standing at your door,
Because you are lost in thoughts of one
To the exclusion of all else,
You shall be lost in his thoughts:
Though you goad his memory hard,
He shall fail to remember you,
Even as a man drunk remembers not
Thereafter, the tale he told before.”*

(The Curse of Durvasa)

As Durvasa is very powerful there is nothing they could do about the curse, instead they plead for consolation. Durvasa says that the token of the king (the ring) would enable him to remember who Sakuntala is and all the lost memories will be restored. The scene shifts and Sakuntala is shown preparing herself to leave to the Royal palace with the hope to restore the memories of her husband and make him aware of her pregnancy. Gautami helps her, so do Anasuya and Priyamvada; meanwhile, Kanva enters after completing his prayers with grief stricken heart as his daughter leaving. Gautami, Saradvata and Sarngarava are also ordered to go with Sakuntala and ensure she reaches the Palace safely and the reunion is without any trouble. Emotions flow through Kanva and every other individual in the hermitage as she leaves. This act in Abhijnanasakuntalam contains most unexpected events from announcing of the marriage to the curse and acceptance of the marriage by Kanva and Gautami.

Act – V or The Repudiation of Sakuntala (Scene: The Palace):

The King is seen with burdensome schedules and is weary by performing his duties. Madhavya asks to listen to the song and music played by her wife Hamsavati. The song suggests subtly that she is being neglected and Dushyanta feels a yearning in his heart but cannot understand the reason for his heart to behave as such. At this moment, the chamberlain announces the presence of hermits from the hermitage of Kanva and Dushyanta asks for them immediately by inviting them with proper Vedic rites. After the reception, Sarngarava and Gautami remind the king of the secret marriage between him and Sakuntala but he cannot remember anything. Sakuntala understanding the effects of the curse by Durvasa tries to produce the ring on her hand and to her surprise the ring won't be in its place. Sakuntala shattered by the absence of the ring stands in the palace without any proof, while Gautami exclaims that she the ring might have slipped off in the pool while she was washing her face. Dushyanta accuses the hermits and Sakuntala, but the high priest suggests seeing if there is any truth behind the story as the people are from the hermitage of Kanva. Dushyanta agrees to provide facilities in the palace till the child is born so that the child could be examined and determined which of the two parties is speaking the truth. However, heartbroken Sakuntala asks the earth to take her and she is taken away by light to the bewilderment of Dushyanta.

Act – VI or Separation from Sakuntala (Scene: Capital of Dushyanta & The Pleasure Gardens):

Two policemen recognize the royal signet ring in possession of a fisherman. The fisherman pleads that he found the ring in a fish he caught lately. A police chief goes to the king and submits the ring which disturbs him a lot. The fisherman is given leave without any punishment and further given compensation. However, Dushyanta feels horribly sorry for himself and the way he treated Sakuntala. By the time recognition of Sakuntala (Abhijnanasakuntalam) by Dushyanta is fulfilled he has absolutely no idea where she was taken and how to find her.

Misrakesi, an apsara comes to check the situation in the palace as requested by Menaka and she oversees things invisibly. She finds out from maids that the king is in a miserable condition and she relates the same predicament to Sakuntala. Dushyanta expresses his grief to Madhavya and the court-jester tries to console him.

Meanwhile, Chaturika brings the portrait of Sakuntala which intensifies the grief of the king and the same he feels terrible loneliness without his love. As the Queen Vasumati is expected to make her presence in the gardens, Dushyanta hands over the painting of Sakuntala to him and asks to flee.

An attendant comes to Dushyanta and informs the Queen has returned observing a note in his hand. The note is about a wealthy merchant who unfortunately died in a shipwreck and all his property is unclaimed. The King orders to give the property to whichever wife is pregnant, but decides against it as it is only fair to do justice to everyone depending on the trade of the merchant. So, he orders to share all the properties of the merchant to his family and loved ones.

The thought of a pregnant wife disturbs him as he with blindness turned out the one who was about to produce the heir of his family and the future king of Hasthinapura. As he laments his decision, he hears cries of anguish and finds Madhavya is taken by a demon form. He chases the demon and frees his friend only to find that the demon is Matali who came to take Dushyanta to assist in battle against demon – Kalanemi. It is revealed that Matali intentionally apprehended Madhavya to distract the King from the misery. Both Matali and Dushyanta mount the chariot as the act ends.

Act – VII or Sakuntala’s prosperity (Scene: Celestial regions & Hermitage of Maricha):

Dushyanta along with other warriors of Heaven vanquish all the demons and he is seen returning with Matali. As they travel through the path of Heavens, Dushyanta expresses his desire to pay homage at the hermitage of Maricha. Matali takes him to the hermitage and leaves the king in the serene place. As the King contemplates on the divine presence and tranquillity in the hermitage he hears some voices and turns towards them to find a young boy playing with lion cube, trying to open its mouth so that he could count the number of teeth. He feels so related to the boy that he goes and pampers him and the ascetics are surprised to see that the boy also feels comfortable with the stranger. The ascetic women realize the armlet of the boy is missing and Dushyanta finds it where the boy was wrestling the lion cub previously.

Maricha gives that armlet during the natal rites of the child and it is charmed. Anyone apart from the parents or the boy himself touches the armlet it turns into a snake and bites them. The ascetics immediately recognize the stranger as Dushyanta and the King in joyously confident that the boy is his own and Sakuntala is in the hermitage.

Sakuntala and Dushyanta unite in tears and the King explains how his memory got restored once he saw the signet ring found by a fisherman. Maricha, Aditi and Matali enter the scene and Maricha blesses the pair to live in prosperity. Maricha states that their family needs no boon as it includes a Father equal to Indra, Mother born of an Apsara and son who can make demons run. The play Abhijnanasakuntalam ends with the blissful reunion and the family is seen to return to the palace of Dushyanta.

This version of Abhijnanasakuntalam by Kalidasa is different from the one mentioned in the epic “Mahabharata “; however, apart from the dramatic effects and the dialogues the story reaches to its end in the same way as that described in the epic. Hence, many consider both the versions as authentic with only difference being the description of characters by the two poets.