Introduction to Indian Classical Literature

Study Material for

Semester –I

MJC

Plot structure of Abhigyaan Shakuntalam

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| Taken from legend, the work tells of the seduction of the nymph Shakuntala by King Dushyanta, his rejection of the girl and his child, and their subsequent reunion in heaven. The child that is born is Bharata, the eponymous ancestor of the Indian nation (Bharatavarsha, "Subcontinent of Bharata"). Kalidasa remakes the story into a love idyll whose characters represent a pristine aristocratic ideal: the girl, sentimental, selfless, alive to little but the delicacies of nature, and the king, first servant of the dharma (religious and social law and duties), protector of the social order, resolute hero, yet tender and suffering agonies over his lost love. The plot and characters are made believable by a change Kalidasa introduces: Dushyanta is not responsible for the lovers' separation; he acts only under a delusion caused by a sage's curse. As in all of Kalidasa's works, the beauty of nature is depicted with an inimitable elegance of metaphor. |
| Kalidasa |

Kalidasa (flourished 5th century CE, India) was a Sanskrit poet and dramatist, probably the greatest Indian writer of any epoch. The six works identified as genuine are the dramas Abhijnanashakuntala ("The Recognition of Shakuntala"), Vikramorvashi ("Urvashi Won by Valour"), and Malavikagnimitra ("Malavika and Agnimitra"); the epic poems Raghuvamsha ("Dynasty of Raghu") and Kumarasambhava ("Birth of the War God"); and the lyric "Meghaduta" ("Cloud Messenger").

As with most classical Indian authors, little is known about Kalidasa's person or his historical relationships. His poems suggest but nowhere declare that he was a Brahman (priest), liberal yet committed to the orthodox Hindu worldview. His name, literally "servant of Kali," presumes that he was a Shaivite (follower of the god Shiva, whose consort was Kali), though occasionally he eulogizes other gods, notably Vishnu.

A Sinhalese tradition says that he died on the island of Sri Lanka during the reign of Kumaradasa, who ascended the throne in 517. A more persistent legend makes Kalidasa one of the "nine gems" at the court of the fabulous king Vikramaditya of Ujjain. Unfortunately, there are several known Vikramadityas (Sun of Valour—a common royal appellation); likewise, the nine distinguished courtiers could not have been contemporaries. It is certain only that the poet lived sometime between the reign of Agnimitra, the second Shunga king (c. 170 BCE) and the hero of one of his dramas, and the Aihole inscription of 634 CE, which lauds Kalidasa. He is apparently imitated, though not named, in the Mandasor inscription of 473. No single hypothesis accounts for all the discordant information and conjecture surrounding this date.

An opinion accepted by many—but not all—scholars is that Kalidasa should be associated with Chandra Gupta II (reigned c. 380–c. 415). The most convincing but most conjectural rationale for relating Kalidasa to the brilliant Gupta dynasty is simply the character of his work, which appears as both the perfect reflection and the most thorough statement of the cultural values of that serene and sophisticated aristocracy.

Tradition has associated many works with the poet; criticism identifies six as genuine and one more as likely ("Ritusamhara," the "Garland of the Seasons," perhaps a youthful work). Attempts to trace Kalidasa's poetic and intellectual development through these works are frustrated by the impersonality that is characteristic of classical Sanskrit literature. His works are judged by the Indian tradition as realizations of literary qualities inherent in the Sanskrit language and its supporting culture. Kalidasa has become the archetype for Sanskrit literary composition.

In drama, his Abhijnanashakuntala is the most famous and is usually judged the best Indian literary effort of any period. Taken from an epic legend, the work tells of the seduction of the nymph Shakuntala by King Dushyanta, his rejection of the girl and his child, and their subsequent reunion in heaven. The epic myth is important because of the child, for he is Bharata, eponymous ancestor of the Indian nation (Bharatavarsha, "Subcontinent of Bharata"). Kalidasa remakes the story into a love idyll whose characters represent a pristine aristocratic ideal: the girl, sentimental, selfless, alive to little but the delicacies of nature, and the king, first servant of the dharma (religious and social law and duties), protector of the social order, resolute hero, yet tender and suffering agonies over his lost love. The plot and characters are made believable by a change Kalidasa has wrought in the story: Dushyanta is not responsible for the lovers' separation; he acts only under a delusion caused by a sage's curse. As in all of Kalidasa's

works, the beauty of nature is depicted with a precise elegance of metaphor that would be difficult to match in any of the world's literatures.

The second drama, Vikramorvashi (possibly a pun on vikramaditya), tells a legend as old as the Vedas (earliest Hindu scriptures), though very differently. Its theme is the love of a mortal for a divine maiden; it is well known for the "mad scene" (Act IV) in which the king, grief-stricken, wanders through a lovely forest apostrophizing various flowers and trees as though they were his love. The scene was intended in part to be sung or danced.

The third of Kalidasa's dramas, Malavikagnimitra, is of a different stamp—a harem intrigue, comical and playful, but not less accomplished for lacking any high purpose. The play (unique in this respect) contains datable references, the historicity of which have been much discussed.

Kalidasa's efforts in kavya (strophic poetry) are of uniform quality and show two different subtypes, epic and lyric. Examples of the epic are the two long poems Raghuvamsha and Kumarasambhava. The first recounts the legends of the hero Rama's forebears and descendants; the second tells the picaresque story of Shiva's seduction by his consort Parvati, the conflagration of Kama (the god of desire), and the birth of Kumara (Skanda), Shiva's son. These stories are mere pretext for the poet to enchain stanzas, each metrically and grammatically complete, redounding with complex and reposeful imagery. Kalidasa's mastery of Sanskrit as a poetic medium is nowhere more marked.

A lyric poem, the "Meghaduta," contains, interspersed in a message from a lover to his absent beloved, an extraordinary series of unexcelled and knowledgeable vignettes, describing the mountains, rivers, and forests of northern India.

The society reflected in Kalidasa's work is that of a courtly aristocracy sure of its dignity and power. Kalidasa has perhaps done more than any other writer to wed the older, Brahmanic religious tradition, particularly its ritual concern with Sanskrit, to the needs of a new and brilliant secular Hinduism. The fusion, which epitomizes the renaissance of the Gupta period, did not, however, survive its fragile social base; with the disorders following the collapse of the Gupta Empire, Kalidasa became a memory of perfection that neither Sanskrit nor the Indian aristocracy would know again.