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Sanskrit Theatre and Abhigyan Shakuntalam: An Analytical Study

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Abstract:

Indian theatre has its origin from Sanskrit literary tradition. Sanskrit dramatist wrote on mythological and historical themes. Bharata Muni's '*Natyashastra*' is the major work in Sanskrit literature. Sanskrit drama can be divided in two parts namely rupakas and uparupakas. In Sanskrit theatre expression of emotion and feeling is more important. According to Bharata Muni's *Natyashastra* there are two modes of theatrical representation lokadhrami and natyadhrami. We can see lokadhrami in Indian folk and natyadhrami in classic dance and drama. Musice was an essential part of theatre. Bharata Muni and Kalidas talked about dhurva songs. The relation between 'folk' forms and Sanskrit performance is also old. Kalidas was one of the greatest Sanskrit dramatists. He becomes popular in the world by his miracle work named '*Abhigyan Shakuntalam*'. It is a seven act play and tells about the love, marriage, separation and reunion of king Dushyanta and Muni's daughter Shakuntala. Sir William Jones translated Kalidas's *Abhigyan Shakuntalam* in 1798. *Abhigyan Shakuntalam*' is fine piece of literature. This play laid the foundation of Indian social culture in literature which reminds us of great Indian culture and tradition. This play was staged internationally and was admired by great philosophers and theatre personalities because of its Hindu traditional theme, father-daughter relationship, depiction of nature and emotion very vividly.

Keywords: literary tradition, theatre, mythological, folk, performance, dhurva songs, culture, relationship, transmitted, rediscovery, resemblance, romance.

There is a deep relation between Sanskrit theatre and Indian theatre. In fact it draws from the Sanskrit literary tradition. The Sanskrit dramatist wrote on the mythological or historical themes because the audiences liked this type of plays at that time. The keystone work in Sanskrit literature is Bharata Muni's *Natyashastra*.

We can divide Sanskrit drama in two parts namely rupakas and uparupakas. Rupaka is one of the ten major forms, and uparupakas are the minor forms of stage craft. Sanskrit theatre gave more importance to the representation of bhava i.e. to express emotion and feeling. The artist expresses his bhava on the stage with the help of expressive acting. The art of acting is drawn from the aesthetic experience of rasa. According to Bharata Muni's Natyashastra there are two modes of theatrical representation. The first part of theatrical representation is lokadhrami. According to Bharata Muni's Natyashastra there are two modes of theatrical representation which means as we see the things in ordinary life. The second form is natyadhrami and it is more convenient form than the lokdhrami. Lokdhrami we can see in many Indian folk form and natyadharmi we can see in classical dance or dance drama. When we talk about the structure especially the linguistic structure of Sanskrit drama is also important, valuable and significant.

Music was an essential part of any theatre and music provide pleasure to the audience in the recitation of the text. Many Sanskrit dramatists like Bharata Muni and Kalidas also talk about dhruva song. The prominent change that we can see in Sanskrit theatre is its shift from rupakas to uparupakas which is marked by the more use of music. The use of musical recitation of text was already present in the time of Kalidas and Harivansa, and it was increasing with the passage of time. In uparupakas music has an essential part and it was called sangitakes i.e. 'song works'. Dance, too, acquired a more dominant place in the dramatic and theatrical structure.

The relation between 'folk' forms and Sanskrit performance is also old. In Kalidasa's Vikramorvasiyor the stage direction is very well expressed in 'Urwasi won by valour'. It expressed both music and dance in its extensive form. Many terms of dance and music had its origin in the medieval age, and it was later presented in Kalidas's script. In kalidas's play there is an unbroken tradition of performance.

Sanskrit theatre had classical work some of them are orally transmitted from generation to generation among the community of artists. The rediscovery of the Natyashastra by Bhasa excited artists in Sanskrit dramatic performance. After independence Indian theatre was searching its identity and its find its source in traditional form and classics of Sanskrit. As a result, Sanskrit was revised under the direction of directors like K.N. Panikkar and actors like Daji Bhatawadekar. In Sanskrit the most read dramatist are Bhasa, shudraka, and, Kalidasa.

Kalidas was one of the greatest Sanskrit dramatists. He wrote three famous romantic plays namely Malavikagnimitram, Vikramorvasiyam and Abhigyan Shakuntalam. Kalidas occupies the same position in Sanskrit literature that Shakespeare occupies in English literature. We can call Kalidas the Shaskpeare of Indian literature. Sir Monier Williams says:

“Of all Indian dramatists and indeed of all Indian poets the most Celebrated
is Kaladasa, the poetical merit of whose ‘Sakoontala’ is universally admitted
that any remarks on this head would be superfluous”

Sanskrit poet Jayadev gave the title Kavi Kul Guru to Kalidas. He says that works of Kalidas full the hearts of audience with happiness. He is not only our national poet but the preserver of our national culture. Indian culture speaks in his voice and reflects in his works. He becomes popular in the world by his miracle work named ‘Abhigyan *Shakuntalam*. Kalidas was one of the greatest Sanskrit dramatists. It was written nearly 2,500 years ago. This play tells the immortal love story of king Dushyanta and sage girl Shakuntala. This play laid the foundation of Indian social culture in literature. In his plays he deals with famous Hindu legends and themes. The story is written in the form of a play. This kind of immortal love story we can’t see in any literature. Sir William Jones translated Kalidas’s Abhigyan Shakuntalam in 1798. It was translated in 46 languages. We cannot tell the exact time of publication of Abhigyan Shakuntalam but we know that the time period of Kalidasa is between the 1st century BCE and 4th century CE. The title Abhigyan Shakuntalam means pertaining to the recognition of Shakuntala. Sometimes we translate the title as the token for recognition of Shakuntala that was a ring given by Dushyanta to her as a sign of their love. We can find the source of this play in Mahabharata with the name Sakuntalapaa khyana .We can also find it in, Adi Parva, Sambhava Parva in Adhyaayaas 68 to 74.

Abhigyan Shakuntalam is a seven act play and it is about the love, marriage, separation and reunion of king Dushyanta and Muni’s daughter Shakuntala. Kalidas becomes popular in the world by his miracle work named ‘Abhigyan *Shakuntalam*.’ The meaning of Shakuntala is the one who is taken care by birds. Kanava tells about the finding of Shakuntala in Adi Parva of Mahabharata: “She was surrounded in the solitude wilderness by Sakunta birds

Hence, I name her Shakuntala, the one protected by Shakuntas.”

King Dushyanta of Hastinapur belongs to the Puru’s race .One day he goes on a hunting expedition with his army. On the way, he is tired of hunting; he is hungry and thirsty, so he reaches Tapovan. There is plenty of trees full of fruits and sweet water. After having water and fruits he goes to the hermitage of sage Kanva to meet him and to say thanks for water and fruits. The sage was not there he went away for pilgrimage. Dushyanta hides himself behind the tree and hears the conversation of Shakuntala with two of her friends Anasuya and Priyamvada. He comes out of hiding after the confirmation of her birth. Shakuntala receives him with respect in the absence of her father. She is sage kanava daughter but doing odd jobs of the ashram happily. The king Dushyanta falls in love with beautiful Shakuntala at first sight as she is the daughter of apsra Menaka and compares her with new spring leaf. Shakuntala also feels attraction towards him. King Dushyanta asks her that she seems ill if it is because of heat or the flame of love that fire in both hearts equally. She is in love but, she is in confusion whether to express it or not. King assures her with the words: “Kanva knows the law, and shall find no fault in what you’ve done”(Act 3) King says that his father gave approval to their union because you chose a king for love. The description of love sick Shakuntala is full of sensuality. Shakuntala says that god of love (cupid) injects pain in her body by day and night. The romance of Shakuntala and Dushyanta is described by the trees of mango and jasmine in Act one. German poet Goethe comments: “If you wish to enjoy the fragrance of spring flowers and flavors of summer fruits together ,or wish to see something that entralls, be witches, entices and satiates you, all at the same time, then you must savors the ‘ *Abhigyan shakuntalam*’.”

From Sakuntala he came to know that she is the daughter of Vishwamitra and Menaka. They lived together for ten years and Menaka gave birth to a daughter and told Vishwamitra that she was sent by Indra to break his mediation. Vishwamitra felt cheated and he left both, mother and daughter. Menka too went to heaven by placing her daughter on the bank of the river Malini. So she was forsaken by both of parents and adopted by Sage Kanva.

Dushyanta gives proposal of gaadharva vivaha to Shakuntala in the absence of sage Kanva which is legally sanctioned for a Kshatriya. He says:

“O beautiful one! Be my wife. Tell me what I can do for you. My entire kingdom will be yours. O lovely one! Marry me now itself according to the type of marriage known as ‘gandharva vivaha’.”

Shakuntala agrees on condition that the son born of her shall be the king of throne. All this happened in the interval when Sage Kanva was away. The king gives her a ring as a sign of love and promises to take her to the palace. In the absence of king Dushyanta, she feels lonely and loses interest in everything. She loses herself in the memory of king. Love is depicted in its both forms in union and in separation in ‘*Abhigyan Shakuntalam*’ In separation scene, Kalidas shows a deep insight in Shakuntala’s character. But even in this sad moment, she does not forget feminine modesty. At that time, Rishi Durvasa arrives and gets angry for not attending him properly and curses her that the one in whose memory she forget her manners to serve a guest would forget Shakuntala when the time comes. Shakuntala’s friends request the sage to forgive Shakuntala because she is in great pain of separation from her loves one. But the Sage is adamant and known for his short temper. Anasuya and Priyamvada don’t tell about the curse to Shakuntala. But Anasuya is worried that even after long time, king Dushyanta does not sent any message to Shakuntala or it may be possible that he forgets about Shakuntala because he has so many queens in his palace to love. When the sage returned, he knew by his spiritual insight that Shakuntala and Dushyanta were united by gandharva vivaaha and his daughter was pregnant. The sage gives approval on the marriage. But king forgets his promise because of Durvasa’s curse. After months of waiting, in act fourth of the play sage Kanava arranges for the visit of Shakuntala to King Dushyanta. The departure seen of Shakuntala is heart rending. The feeling of a father is truly depicted although sage Kanva is not his biological father. Sage Kanva found her on the bank of the river Malini. She was surrounded by the birds to give her protection. The departure scene reminds us of the scene of Bollywood movie Vivah where the heroine Poonam giving blanket to his father when he is going for a morning walk and says in next days she would not be there for giving him blanket and both father and daughter weep and father says who made this tradition of daughter’s departure from his father’s home. Same here in *Abhigyan Shakuntalam* birds, animals, and nature is showing tear on Shakuntala departure. Shakuntala says good bye to that mango and jasmine trees mentioned in act one. Their romance is personified by these two trees. ‘*Abhigyan Shakuntalam*’ is the greatest play in Sanskrit literature and we can see this in the following quoted stanza of criticism:

“Of all poetry, drama is the most delight of all drama Shakuntala. Of Shakuntala

the Fourth Act and of the Fourth Act the four slokas (of the four sloks the one

Beginning with ‘yasyatyadya’ is the most beautiful one which captivates your heart.)”

There are many scenes in ‘*Abhigyan Shakuntalam*’ which remind us of Indian culture and tradition. The scene where she throws rice over her head to the Tapovan and prays to God that Tapovan always full of plenty and happiness in her absence reminds us of the scene of Indian girl departure. The father daughter relationship is very well expressed with the character of sage Kanva and Shakuntala. Even the emotion of nature, birds, and animals are expressed in text of ‘*Abhigyan Shakuntalam*’. When king fails to recognize Shakuntala because of the curse. There was a prophecy that a son born to her would become the king. After the rejection, she feels heartbroken and decides not to return back to the Tapovan with sage Kanva. She prays the earth to swallow her as she swallowed Sita after the rejection from god Rama. Then apsara takes her in Marica’s ashram where Sarvadamna was born. When the king gets back his ring he feels guilty for not recognizing Shakuntala and humiliating her publically for her pregnancy although she is the mother of his child. Now he wishes to take her back but he does not know where she is. Here the physical love converts into spiritual love. The king is very sad and decides not to celebrate spring season. The description of spring season in the absence of Shakuntala brings tears in our eyes. He makes a beautiful picture of Shakuntala. After six year; he stays on an ashram and sees a child named Sarvadamana playing with tiger. He was counting the teeth of tiger. He sees some signs of resemblance in the child. Then he comes to know that the child belongs to Puru race now he is sure that it is his own child from shakuntala. He falls on the feet of Shakuntala and asks for forgiveness. All these things happen because of the curse of Durvasa but, now the curse is over. It is Kalidas’s brilliance that he creates this kind of dramatic situation. The arrival of Rishi Durvasa just after king Dushyanta departure is the turning point in the story. The king recalls everything and takes back Shakuntala to Hastinapur with the blessing of sage Marichi and Aditi. They reunite and later Shakuntala’s son Sarvadamana known as Bharath after whom our country Bharat begets her name. The play ends with the prayer of lord Shiva. ‘*Abhigyan Shakuntalam*’ is fine piece of literature. It tells us about the origin of Raghukul in which god Rama was born. It enhances our knowledge about Indian mythology. The version of Abhigyansakuntalam in Vedvayash’s Mahabharata is slightly different, but it is also a standard version. Guru Rabindranath Tagore says:

“There are two unions in Shakuntala, the motif of the play is the progress from the earlier physical union of the first act with its earthly unstable beauty and romance, to the higher union of eternal bliss, described in the last act of the play .Love is elevated from the sphere of physical beauty to the eternal heaven of moral beauty.”

Tagore says that ‘*Abhigyan Shakuntalam*’ is a work that begins with beauty and ends with divinity like American poet, Robert Frost’s poems which begin in delight and end in wisdom.

This play was staged internationally and was admired by great philosophers and theatre personalities because of its Hindu traditional theme, father-daughter relationship, depiction of nature and emotion very vividly. This play was performed musically in many countries including Australia, France, Italy, Hungary and Norway. Germany’s greatest poet and philosopher Goethe read Kalidasa’s play in the following verses:

“Would’st thou the Earth and Heaven itself in one sole name
combine? I name thee, O Sankuntala! And all at once is.”

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