Introduction

The origins of Asian as well as Western drama and theatre are almost invariably connected with the gods or invisible forces. Pre-modern theatre forms are also usually linked with shamanism, healing processes, and trance as well as with other ritual activities. For instance the connection between Dionysus, the ancient fertility god, and Greek classical theatre is generally acknowledged. In the same way several examples may be cited from various Asian cultures and communities: the Chinese opera, the Japanese Noh theatre as well as several examples of traditional theatre in Southeast Asia which contain elements of ritual. The folk and classical traditions of Indian theatre demonstrate the same pattern.

The Natyasastra and the Origins of Indian Theatre

The Natyasastra, the oldest classic on Indian performing arts, usually dated to between the 2nd century B.C.E and the 2nd century C.E., is said to have been written by one Bharata Muni. It expresses the belief that the classical Indian theatre as an art form is based upon religion and rituals. The evidence presented in several of its opening chapters indicates the kind of colouring that is to be found in the Sanskrit drama. The Natyasastra itself has been accorded a special status, comparable with that given to the four sacred Veda. According to the story contained in the Natyasastra on one occasion Indra and several other gods approached Brahma for a religious text suitable for members of all classes of society, including the outcasts-- the Untouchables (Sudra)-- to which group undoubtedly belonged the performing arts. These people were not allowed to read the Veda or even to listen to readings from those holy books. To fulfill this request Brahma created a new book, the Natyasastra, taking materials from the four other holy works. The god borrowed the elements of recitative from the Rigveda, music from the
Samaveda, the art of imitation or mimesis from the Yajurveda and rasa or the sentiments from the Atharvaveda. The combination of all these elements in fact resulted in the Natyasastra. In recognition of its status as a fifth veda, the new book came to be known as Natyaveda. Brahma presented the book to Indra. In addition, Brahma also gave guidelines for the development of plots for the dramatic, which, he outlined should make use of historical tales, as well as legends (itihasa).

With the creation of the of the theatre (natya) itself, and the Natyasastra, the work that would forever define it as well as guide it, the possibility of the first performance based on it, was raised. The gods should in fact have staged such a performance. However, they themselves lacked the capacity to bring this about. With that Brahma sought the assistance of the sage Bharata and his one hundred sons so that such a performance could be presented. Bharata was himself faced with a problem in that his troupe consisted only of his sons; it had no actresses to play the female roles. Through Indra, he once again appealed for Brahma’s assistance. Brahma immediately created several nymphs (apsara) with the natural talent to perform dance and theatre. They were handed over to Bharata to be used as actresses in his proposed performance. Once Bharata and his troupe were adequately prepared, arrangements were made for the first performance. On the suggestion of Brahma it was scheduled to coincide with Indra’s Banner Festival.

The first play staged was an enactment of an episode in which the demons (raksaksa, daitya) were defeated by the gods. This theme angered the demons and when they protested, Brahma tried to calm them down. In brief the god’s stand was that natya or the drama, was in fact a total work containing all wisdom, a representation of truth or reality:

There is no wise maxim, no learning, no art or craft
No device or action that is not found in the drama.²

In other words, in the newly created art of drama there was something for everyone, and thus everyone, even the demons, should be satisfied. It appears that the first play

---

presented by Bharata’s troupe had the same essential elements as the plays used in Kaliattam, an ancient art form still active in Southern India. Kaliattam depicts the conflict between Darika, a demon, and the goddess Kali; in performances, Kali succeeds in killing Darika.

The second play to be performed was based on the story of the Churning of the Ocean, which is connected, with the first incarnation (avatara) of Vishnu as a tortoise (kurma). It is believed that the circular movements used in this performance eventually became part of the Raslila theatre style. This form was developed by followers of the Bhakti movement which developed in South India in the 13th century and eventually spread to the north of the sub-continent between the 14th and 17th centuries. The concept of ras, the opening dance section in a Raslila performance, is based upon the legend of the disappearance of Krishna from the cowgirls (gopi) and his re-emergence in his multiple images as the flute player. In the ras performance a lamp placed in the center of the circle of dancers represents Krishna.

According to the Natyasastra the third play to be staged was Tripuradaha (The Burning of the City of Tripura). The performance, done in the Himalayas in honour of Shiva, marked the descent of theatre from the celestial regions to earth. Following that theatre became an activity for human beings. Even though this is the case, in many a culture theatre still maintains its strong links with the sacred. In India Ramlila and Raslila are still staged to mark, respectively, the birthdays of Rama and Krishna, the two most important avatara of Vishnu.

From this brief history of the theatre as enunciated in the Natyasastra, several highly significant points emerge to give an indication of the original performance context. Firstly it is clear that theatre and drama came about as a result of divine inspiration and origination. Secondly the principal sources for the dramatic content came from material connected with religion. Thirdly, that the prime movers of the theatre were the gods themselves, and that they too were supposed to be its first performers. However, since the gods were unable to undertake the task of actually presenting the plays, this responsibility
was assigned to Bharata and his hundred sons. Fourthly that the first performance was staged on a religious occasion. Fifthly that for the earliest plays the audience consisted of the gods and other invisible being. Finally that even though the drama was intended to impart religious or moral teachings, its role as a means of entertainment was acknowledged.

Virtually the same principles have been maintained in most Asian folk and classical theatre genres. The Japanese No theatre was a sacred art connected with Shintoism, and some its sacredness is retained to this day. Various forms of Chinese theatre continue to be presented in honour of ancestors and gods, if not in China proper due to the influence of Communism, at least in the Chinese communities of the Diaspora, where some connection between theatre and religious festivals is maintained. And many of the dance theatre forms of India drive their origins and inspiration from the kinds of materials mentioned as sources of dramatic repertoire in the Natyasastra, and with that the original spirit and purpose of drama, essentially religious and moral in character, is still retained. These theatre forms include the highly spectacular dance-theatre forms Kudiyattam, Krishnaattam, Ramanattam, and Kathakali. In the same way, many of the older styles of traditional Southeast Asian theatre--the shadow play (wayang kulit) and the vast variety of proto-theatre genres, those of Bali in particular, may be cited as instances --still retain their connection with the invisible world.

The classical Sanskrit drama, the subject of our particular focus in this paper, came into existence and remained active between the 2nd and 12th or 13th centuries C.E. Following that it declined due to several factors including cultural and political developments in the sub-continent. Available information regarding the Sanskrit drama comes principally from extant play-scripts, from books like Bharata Muni’s Natyasastra and Nandikesvara’s Abhinayadarpanam, as well as commentaries on such works. Among the playwrights, Kalidasa is universally regarded as the greatest, and from amongst his works, Abhijnana-shakuntalam, better known to the world as Shakuntala, has been accorded the unquestioned distinction as the most outstanding play; to it no other bears comparison.
The Objectives of Drama

The Natyasastra states the objectives of drama as being the following: the strengthening of dharma, the earning of money as well of the achievement of a good reputation. In addition, drama must contain good advice, traditional maxims and the teaching of the shastra. It also must serve as a means of guidance for various arts and crafts. In other words drama makes provision for entertainment, but through it the artists also have an opportunity to show their individual talents in their respective areas of interest and specialization--acting, dancing, music, the art of stage decoration and costume design -- those elements that are indicated by the all-inclusive term abhinaya. Essentially the basic objectives of a performance incorporating the abhinaya are just two: the teaching of dharma and the attainment of rasa. In the entire corpus of Sanskrit drama there is no play more suitable than Kalidasa’s Shakuntala to best illustrate how these two objectives are attained.

The connection of human beings with themselves as well as the relationship between man and the invisible forces including the gods are developed as important themes in several of the classical Sanskrit plays, in particular those included in the heroic play (nataka) category. From the works of Bhasa, the earliest playwright, to those of the much lesser known final Sanskrit dramatists the theme of man’s relationship with the gods is repeatedly given attention. This is connected with the use of myths and legends in addition to the teaching of high moral values. A large number of the plays are based upon subject matter or themes derived from the texts of the Purana as well as those of the epics, Ramayana and Mahabharata. Ancient myths as well as legends almost forgotten were given new life through the Sanskrit drama, and given the fact that the audiences for these plays were presumably sophisticated, the quality of the plays as written works was extremely high, while the productions attained levels of artistry never again reached in the entire history of Indian theatre.
To this day the connection between theatre and ritual is maintained in the form of theatre consecration rituals (*poorvaranga*) usually done before the commencement of performances. In these rituals are featured several items of paraphernalia handed over by the gods to Bharata on the occasion of the distant first performance: Indra’s flag or banner, *kutilaka*, a stick used by the *vidushaka* actor, a golden bowl, an umbrella and a fan. As far as can be ascertained, this tradition of *poorvaranga* was precisely followed during the golden age of the Sanskrit theatre. Such rituals, with certain variations, can still be seen in almost all genres of Indian folk theatre as well as in theatre genres beyond the sub-continent, particularly in Southeast Asia, where Indian cultural influences are evident.

Even if the texts of the Sanskrit plays are not always sacred in character—and many of the plays are in fact based upon historical or legendary materials as well as purely upon imaginary materials as is the case with Sudraka’s *The Little Clay Cart*—the essential, perhaps erstwhile, sacredness of Sanskrit theatre, *qua* theatre, is confirmed by the mantra recited by artists before the opening of each performance, a mantra whose text makes reference to the four *abhinaya* while at the same time seeking Shiva’s protection. The highly elaborate *poorvaranga* ceremony, maintained in particular in some of the folk genres, confirms the sacredness of the performing arts. Beyond all this, each individual play may contain additional invocations, presented by the director (*sutradhara*) to get a performance started. In the case of *Shakuntala*, the invocation goes as follows:

May Lord Shiva, endowed with eight manifests forms, protect you--
Water the first creation, Fire, conveying to the gods
Oblations offered according to ceremonial rites;
The Sacrificer; time-regulating Sun and Moon;
Ether, with sound for its quality, pervading the Universe;
Earth, Mother of all seeds; Air, by which all creatures are blessed.²

² All quotations from Kalidasa’s *Shakuntala* are taken from the present writer’s unpublished translation.
The event that is to begin the performance of a play is in fact a sacred act, even if over
the centuries this has been altogether forgotten, except in the case of specific folk theatre
forms. The objective of the performance as indicated in the Natyasastra, is to strengthen
dharma and to show the essence and effect of karma. These two themes, dharma and
karma, have a central place in Shakuntala.

The Rasa Concept

The plots of the Sanskrit plays on the whole are relatively simple compared to those of
classical plays from the West. This is due to the difference between the theories of
Sanskrit drama, with that, for instance, of Aristotle, although one is able to find
resemblances between the two forms of theatre, in particular the Greek and the Sanskrit.
While the Greek drama tends to emphasize the plot, designated by Aristotle “the soul of
tragedy” the emphasis in Sanskrit drama is not on action or plot, not even on character;
the emphasis is on the ultimate effect of a play. The most important element, then, is the
evocation of rasa. The term rasa, has been variously translated into English as “flavour”,
“desire,” beauty” and that which is “tasted” or “experienced” in art. The theory of rasa
as developed in the Natyasastra proposes that there are eight fundamental potential or
innate emotional states, called bhava, within every individual:

1. Pleasure or delight (rati)
2. Laughter or humour (hasa)
3. Sorrow or pain (soka)
4. Heroism or courage (utsaha)
5. Anger (krodha)
6. Fear (bhaya)
7. Disgust (jugupsa)
8. Wonder (vismaya)
The essential qualities of these emotional states are identical in every individual, because they are born from almost identical experiences, but then there are also numerous fluctuating or transitory states or sub-states (vyabhicribhava), so that from time to time each of these fundamental emotions gets temporarily altered according to given circumstances and experiences (karana) that an individual goes through, as well as the individual’s reaction to those circumstances. These alterations to the emotional states are reflected in changes in facial expressions, gestures, and mental as well as physical states, which in themselves too are temporary. Those elements that bring about these changes are called vibhava, while the result of vibhava is known as anubhava, that is, an altered emotional or physical state. With this process of change, comes about what is called rasa, which in effect is the final result of the whole process from the potential or dormant state to the awakened or aroused state. The eight rasa as stated by Bharata Muni are as follows:

1. The Erotic (Shringara)
2. The Comic (Hasya)
3. The Pathetic or Compassionate (Karuna)
4. The Furious (Raudra)
5. The Heroic (Wira)
6. The terrible (Bhayanaaka)
7. The Odious (Bibhatsa); and
8. The Marvelous (Adbhuta).

To these eight rasa, the Kashmiri philosopher Abhinavagupta, who flourished in the eleventh century added the ninth, shanta or the rasa of peace, tranquility or calmness, Shanta, which, unlike the other eight, is experienced by an audience member as an overall effect, after he or she has witnessed a full performance. This is significant for, given Indian aesthetic and notions of performing arts, a performance is unlikely to end with any one of the other eight emotions dominating. Abhinavagupta in fact believed that shanta rasa is the beginning and end of all art. “All emotions when their exciting
conditions are present, emerge from Shanta, and when these conditions are withdrawn they again emerge into Shanta.”

From the perspective of the *rasa* theory *Shakuntala* stands out as an exemplary work, in the manner understood by the authors of the *Natyasastra* as well as the *Abhinayadarpanam*. At the same time the play merits study from the point of view of its contents. Given the fact, however, that the specific focus in this paper is on the relationship between Man and certain of his beliefs, the issue of *rasa* has to await another occasion. Several aspects of religion connected with the Sanskrit drama and more particularly with *Shakuntala* have already been previously stated in passing. From this point on attention will be devoted only two principal themes, *karma* and *dharma*, as manifested in this play.

*Karma and Dharma as Central Themes in Shakuntala*

It has repeatedly been stressed in previous studies that *Shakuntala* has love as its principal theme; that *Shakuntala* is in fact a romantic play. It is certainly obvious that love stands out as perhaps the principal theme of the work. At the same time however, there are evident several other important themes: heroism, the concept of an ideal king, a concept that is tied to that of *dharma*. Then there is the theme of nature, which again is tied up with that of *dharma*. Another outstanding theme is that of Fate or destiny, which perhaps is better stated as that of *karma*. It is clear, then, that whichever of the play’s vital issues are examined, it is impossible to escape from the spirit of religion and the two fundamental themes of *dharma* and *karma*.

As a play *Shakuntala* is couched within the traditions of Hinduism—its mythology, as well as its philosophical bases. Almost at every stage of the development of its action are encountered invisible beings as characters or as forces, such as the gods, that play other roles in the overall direction that the events take. As in the brief episode in the Adiparva of the *Mahabharata* upon which the play’s outline is based, the play’s principal

characters are King Dushyanta and Shakuntala, respectively its hero and heroine. The other characters, original creations of Kalidasa, secondary in nature, play significantly lesser roles. But an unseen character, a character that is in fact totally involved in the events of the play as they unfold is Fate, Destiny or *Karma*. True this abstract character and others like it are not physically presented on stage as in mediaeval European theatre, but hey are all the same, often represented but by a voice. Indeed even the god Indra, despite his significant role, does not make a physical appearance in the play. This method of representing the invisible, it appears has been wisely adopted by Kalidasa, for as a purely mythological play Shakuntala would undoubtedly have been devoid of much of its current aesthetic merit. Several times in the unfolding of events there is a sense that what transpires before us in fact happens as a result of the intervention or action of a force that Man is unable to control or even to comprehend fully. The first meeting between Dushyanta and Shakuntala is an altogether unexpected one, at least on the human level. But before the encounter actually takes place, there is the highly significant statement by Dushyanta:

“Before us lie the closed portals of time.”

In reality Time and Fate, as two highly important elements in the play, determine its action. We are informed, towards the end of the play, that Father Kashyapa, also known as Kanva, Shakuntala’s adopted father, given his spiritual powers, knew all along that the meeting between Dushyanta and Shakuntala would take place, as would their marriage. It was for this reason that, when he returns to his forest hermitage from meditations in Somatirtha, Kanva is not upset that Shakuntala has submitted to the pressures exerted by Dushyanta and has married the king without his permission or blessings according to the *ghandarva* system. On the other hand he gives thanks, and straightaway proclaims that the child to be born from this marriage will become “the glory of the world”. Much higher authority, Indra’s parents, eventually confirms this.

But destiny has other plans—it does not intend the relationship between Dushyanta and Shakuntala to run the normal course. Hindrances there must be, and almost immediately
following the marriage the difficulties begin. The curse of Durvasas is presented in such a way that it is credible and altogether acceptable. A young recently married woman is dreaming of her departed husband, and without even being aware of it, has failed to respond to a hermit’s appeal for alms. An innocuous situation, but this represents yet another powerful manifestation of *karma*. The two young and recently married lovers are to be inevitably, cruelly separated. They are to go through a severe process of emotional and spiritual maturing before they can meet again.

This pattern of meeting, separation and reconciliation has become almost a norm in the plots of traditional Indian drama. This is true in *Shakuntala* as well as in Bhasa’s *Vision of Vasavadatta*. But Kalidasa wishes us to know that there is a higher reality at work, that the meeting, separation and reunion has been planned and executed by the gods. The separation is in fact a necessity, and there is a particular reason for it. It is required to give rise to maturity of religious faith. It is for this reason that the curse of Durvasas, once uttered, cannot be altogether revoked even upon the appeal made by Anasuya and Priyamvada, Shakuntala’s closest companions. The curse, in fact, has become a tool of the invisible forces. It can only be slightly modified, so that Shakuntala’s suffering will get somewhat alleviated. Fate has determined that Dushyanta’s all-important ring will be lost at a highly critical moment, and will be found only after the separation of the royal couple. With that and with the miraculous removal of Shakuntala by her mother, the nymph Menaka, to the sky country, the first two phases of the three-part drama of meeting, separation and reconciliation, get completed, even if the effect of the separation upon Dushyanta is yet to be fully worked out. There is not a single human being in existence that is able to alter the fate of the hero and heroine. The gods themselves, who determine their fate, have, since its commencement, played out their role as agents of meeting and now of separation; the gods will continue to play their role until final and permanent union takes place.

So that the ultimate objective of the scheme may be achieved, the audience learns that the god Indra requires King Dushyanta’s assistance in his war against the demons. This is something beyond human comprehension, as is much else that transpires in the play, but
this illogical development, one of many such, is once again required for the movement of the plot, and for the further unfolding of the theme of karma. The gods need a pretext to bring Dushyanta and Shakuntala together, and this takes the form of a war, which breaks out between Indra and the demons. It need not come as a surprise to the readers of the play that Indra is unable to defeat the daitya without Dushyanta’s assistance. This is something beyond comprehension, yet one accepts the situation. Dushyanta’s mission is an unqualified success, and Indra is naturally grateful. On his return journey from the battlefield, passing high in the sky in Indra’s chariot, Dushyanta learns that he and Matali are opportunely passing over the land of the gods. Once again, Fate intervenes. Dushyanta has the opportunity to visit the abode of Maricha and Aditi, Indra’s parents, to pay his respects. Descending, he miraculously meets his infant son, Sarvadamana, as well, as eventually his estranged wife.

The pattern of meeting, separation and reconciliation gets completed, but in a highly unusual situation, in an atmosphere charged with mystical and spiritual energy. This is because Shakuntala is not a normal tale of love. Maricha clears everything up. It is clear that Dushyanta and Shakuntala are not guilty of anything; they committed no sin. The events that transpired in Dushyanta’s palace in Hastinapura, when the king refused to accept Shakuntala as his wife, were the result of the curse of Durvasas; the result of the loss of Dushyanta’s ring. The gods were all along aware of those events and the secrets that lay hidden behind them, for Durvasas was but an agent of the gods. Shakuntala was raised to the heavens to save her from an embarrassing and potentially disgraceful situation. This was a strange and magical development, like many others before it. Invisible voices were heard here and there around the hermitage, and the natural world was alive throughout, as well as fully involved in the events. Unseen beings and even the trees presented Shakuntala with marvelous clothes and jewelry at the time of her leave-taking from her village. Indeed the atmosphere of the play is full of the miraculous—and why not when Shakuntala’s very existence is the result of rather unusual circumstances”

She is no ordinary mortal but the daughter of Menaka, a nymph from Indra’s heaven, and she is under the protection of heavenly beings.
Indication of the play’s supernatural content is indicated throughout the work. The first act gives us information regarding the birth of Shakuntala. In the second and third acts there are examples of the violent nature of the demons that try to destroy the sacred rites in Father Kanva’s hermitage. In the fourth act occurs the curse of Durvasas, and there is the scene of the bestowal of unusual gifts upon Shakuntala. At the end of the fifth act Menaka descends to take Shakuntala to Mount Hemakuta, another *apsara* makes her appearance and, in the sixth act, Matali, comes to lead Dushyanta to the Sky country at Indra’s behest. In the seventh and final act there occurs the reunion between Dushyanta, Shakuntala, and their son in Hemakuta, in a place no less than the abode of the gods.

What is significant, however, besides the playwright’s use of mythological material for dramatic purposes, is the demonstration of the fact that human life is at every moment subjected to the workings of destiny. Divine forces not just control human life; they play an active role in the life of every creature. This is clearly proved by the discussion in the final moments of the play between Dushyanta and Indra’s parents. Fate is active in so many different ways, and yet, ironically, as in our own mundane reality, even those directly affected by it are unaware of its presence; nor do they fully comprehend the events that are taking place. Ultimately, however, the books of the gods are opened so that all may read what is inscribed in them in the boldest of prints. There are no more mysteries.

The next theme that of *dharma* should be discussed by taking into account the play’s principal characters. Dusyanta in particular has often been misinterpreted as an irresponsible, even as an evil, person. He is seen as an opportunist and a rake, someone who comes into the uncorrupted setting of the rural hermitage on a hunting expedition, and who meets a young and innocent girl, Shakuntala, literally half his age, marries her and then almost immediately leaves her without any sense of guilt or shame to return to his numerous wives in Hastinapura. And then, when Shakuntala, now pregnant with his child, is sent following much waiting and anxiety, to his palace according to time-honoured customs and traditions Dushyanta, at first, struck by her unusual beauty, is attracted to her; then he rejects her because she is pregnant, believing that she is someone else’s wife. He denies having married her, or even having set his eyes on her before. This comes as a rude shock to Shakuntala, to her guardian, the elderly Gautami, and to other
members of her entourage. Despite the fact that Shakuntala is severely hurt, her attempts to convince her husband are childlike in their innocence and simplicity, her images of their meetings painted in the gentlest of words in keeping with her own essential nature. But nothing works; everything is lost. The meeting is full of violently contrasting emotions, not just those of the principal characters, but of the host of others as well—they of the palace or of Kanva’s hermitage. The king’s image is seriously tarnished, and even his own courtiers are confused. Dushyanta appears to have deliberately and ruthlessly insulted Shakuntala and the accompanying hermits, even though, they have approached him humbly, given him the relevant facts: Shakuntala is his wife and, their request is that she be received accordingly, with all due courtesy. But their appeals get nowhere, and, caught in a dilemma, they have no choice but to leave Shakuntala in the palace, as tradition demands, before returning home, leave her to her destiny. To take her back would be an ultimate act of shame. Within he court itself, a compromise is finally achieved. Shakuntala is to stay in the palace until the birth of her child, but not as Dushyanta’s wife. The birth of her child would, it is expected, resolve the issue of whether or not the king did marry her. This, of course, does not happen, and Shakuntala, insulted prays for death when the heavens literally open to accept her. Her sincerity is confirmed, but her physical disappearance complicates the play’s plot.

The original story as it appears in the Adiparva section of the Mahabharata, which may have been one of Kalidasa’s sources, does not feature those elements in Kalidasa’s piece, which make it so refined. Dushyanta indeed rejects Shakuntala who appears before him nine years after the marriage with their son, only to be rejected. There seems to be no real justification on the part of Dushyanta for rejecting Shakuntala except, perhaps, his fear or ridicule or timidity. If these events did in fact take place under normal circumstances an unsympathetic conclusion regarding Dushyanta’s character would have been a perfectly legitimate one. But we are able to altogether wipe out any misunderstanding regarding the king’s conduct by keeping in mind two things in connection with the play. First, that Kalidasa’s aim is to represent Dushyanta as a pious individual, as well as an ideal king. Secondly that destiny has played a significant role. Dushyanta’s situation as well as his conduct is outside his own control, as are those of Shakuntala. Both of them voice the
feeling that they themselves do not altogether understand what is happening; why they have to go through such intense suffering that, seemingly, destiny has prepared for them.

The concept of Dushyanta as ideal king, who is religious, who is defender of the customary laws of religion, and who protects the weak and humble is quite clear from other characters’ comments about him. When the king emerges on to the stage for the very first time we see him as heroic and noble. To his charioteer Dushyanta is the veritable Shiva rather than an ordinary mortal going to the hunt. In fact Dushyanta is a manifestation of the devaraja, the king who is the earthly symbol of the gods. His refinement as a person is constantly referred to. He enters Kanva’s hermitage as a humble devotee in such a manner demonstrating his respect for the place and its occupants, replacing his royal garments, with humbler attire; he is in fact not even recognized by the occupants of the hermitage. All of this of course, serves Kalidasa’s dramatic purpose; it allows for the events to unfold in the best possible way so as to achieve the play’s thematic as well as aesthetic objectives. At the hermitage Dushyanta’s is the heroic strength that drives away powerful evil forces so that the rites of the hermits can be appropriately carried out. For the purpose of maintaining continuing peace and order he is forced to delay his return to Hastinapura when he sees the potential dangers from the “flesh-eaters.” Certainly this delay is connected with is desire to spend more time with his beloved, but once again Kalidasa’s dramatic genius takes the opportunity to get Mathavya out of the way so that the play’s plot can work.

It cannot be denied that Dushyanta acts in a totally responsible manner, as king, as defender of the faith, and even as Shakuntala’s admirer. Another aspect of Dushyanta’s character that comes through is his role as a devoted son to his mother, as someone fair and just to his many wives, and as someone who cares for his friends, as indicated by his relationship with Mathavya and his subjects. In short Kalidasa has developed Dushyanta, as a king who upholds dharma and who, as a person, is ever conscious of duty.

In the same way, Shakuntala is shown as an ideal heroine, innocent, in beauty comparable to an angel or nymph, a girl on the threshold of adulthood like a flower
impatient to bloom into maturity. There is nothing in Dushyanta’s or Shakluntala’s
behaviour that may be regarded in an unfavourable light when they first meet, in
circumstances that are equally perfect, if at times contrived. This meeting gives rise to
feelings of mutual attraction, which develop into love and soon lead to marriage. The
incident that becomes the source of tragedy in the lives of these two principal characters
of the play, the terrible curse of Durvasas, uttered merely because Shakuntala fails to
entertain the sage, too should not be viewed as something negative. Even though it is
somewhat reduced it still has serious consequences, but in the structure of the play it has
an important dramatic function, allowing for the development of the various religious
themes. The impending marriage initially gives rise to feelings of discomfort in
Shakuntala principally because her father is not in the hermitage to bless the union and to
himself conduct the marriage ceremonies. Her mind is cleared following Dushyanta’s
explanation, and Kanva’s acceptance of the marriage clears any remaining doubts and
uncertainties. Everything has been done according to principles sanctioned by religion.

And then comes the tragic separation. Before they meet again in the final act of the play
both Dushyanta and Shakuntala experience a range of difficulties, emotional as well as
psychological. Shakuntala, fully in touch with what is happening to Dushyanta suffers by
proxy, for him, rather than for herself. Unlike Dushyanta she has the advantage of
knowledge, happening on dimensions, the material and the spiritual. Dushyanta, cast in
the dark cloud of ignorance as well as guilt, suffers more intensely. Some but not all of
Dushyanta’s suffering is witnessed by Mathavya, the visudhaka, more a brother to
Dushyanta than a mere palace official, but like others around Dushyanta at this time, he
unable to assist. Sanumati witnesses Dushyanta’s sufferings as representative of Menaka
and Shakuntala. She is able to convey to Shakuntala the extent of Dushyanta’s agony.
Through these two characters, Mathavya and Sanumati, a picture of Dushyanta’s extreme
sadness emerges. We do not see Shakuntala on stage for some time, but an indication of
her situation emerges through Sanumati. Shakuntala now leads the lonely life of an
ascetic, a sort of foreshadowing of what lies in her future beyond the actual limits of he
play’s extent. This is a great challenge given that she is still very young and that she has
only recently married the king. Both those portrayals of sadness arouse an atmosphere at once serious and hauntingly spiritual.

The king’s heroism, his bravery and his physical prowess are reaffirmed in the battle between Indra and the demons, in which he participates. This battle, too, is a symbol, and an important one, for the battle is, once again, not only a physical one. In reality Dushyanta’s struggle is one against the negative forces or the demons within himself. This is a psychological and spiritual battle, and, in the end, Dushyanta successfully overcomes his own weaknesses. With that he emerges as a new person, fully cleansed from materialism; he is now qualified to go directly into moksha. His situation parallels that of Shakuntala. Her suffering gives rise to a woman who is pure, confident and calm, looking straight ahead into the future, not just the future in Dushyanta’s palace or even at the hermitage of her father to which she and her husband will retire, but to a future beyond all the cycles of time, beyond all the incarnations.

The spiritual journey made between the first act of the play and the final is an immense one, even if in terms of earthly reality the time taken has been but a few brief years. The limited words given to Shakuntala are insufficient to demonstrate the powerful emotions within her, but what she says is sufficient. Shakuntala surrenders her self to her husband with just one brief, simple sentence: “Victory to my Lord.” There is no need for questions; there is no need to seek explanations from Dushyanta regarding his apparently unjust conduct towards her. There is no need for him to affirm that he still loves her. Her husband is a god. The baser emotions have been left behind. However, before the newly reunited king and his wife leave for home, to clear their confusion regarding the cause of their separation—they are as yet unaware of the curse of Durvasas, unaware of the roles the gods have played in their lives—their ignorance is removed by Maricha and Aditi. Their son’s future as a great king is assured. And the play comes to a close on a note of tranquility and equilibrium, shanta rasa.

Long before we arrive at his moment in the play, when Shakuntala leaves the hermitage in the first act, she asks Father Kanva: “When will I return to this place?” Kanva’s reply
prefigures, in a sense, the final lines of the play. The return to the hermitage will take place when Dushyanta’s son with Shakuntala has taken over the burdens of kingship. Yet this return to the hermitage will be but a symbol of a far greater, an infinitely more meaningful return--a return to the lap of Eternity. The desired final achievement of every soul is to step off the cycles of reincarnation, so as not to return into this mundane reality, not to experience again the joys and sorrows of being born, even as a human being. What is desired is infinity, perpetual peace that awaits everyone who follows the path of dharma. This is the desire expressed by Dushyanta in the final words of the play.

The events experienced by Man in his life are determined by a greater power, by Fate. With that the question of the freedom of Man to determine anything about him does not arise at all. Furthermore the purpose of existence, according to the Hindu philosophy is to attain moksha.

Kalidasa’s Shakuntala demonstrates the ripening of the human spirit, which, from a simple state evolves into a metaphysical level in rediscovery of man’s true cosmic nature. It is but a return, and when this has been achieved, nothing else has any meaning. What else can one desire?

And may the purple self-existent god
Whose vital energy pervades the universe
From further incarnations save my soul.

Seen from this point of view, it can be established that even though love is at first sight an obvious and seemingly dominant theme of Kalidasa’s play, Shakuntala is a work of art that transcends the theme of love, love between a pair of mortals, in this case a king and an innocent village lass. This can be seen from the discussion, attempted above, of what are possibly some, but certainly not all of the play’s more significant themes, themes which ultimately derive from certain philosophical foundations of Hinduism, but which, nevertheless are, in essence, the heritage of Mankind.
BIBLIOGRAPHY


