

## **Shakuntala: An Indian Love Story**

Makarand Paranjape (JNU, New Delhi)

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This is a well-known story in India, occurring earlier in the Mahabharata, but immortalized by India's most famous classical poet, Kalidasa. In passing I wish to make the point that stories in India are always re-told, which makes no one version of them authoritative. This story has also been retold many times—there are even studies about the implications of these retellings—but I think I would like to regard it as a story of India, of one of its originary myths, this story of Shakuntala and Dushyanta. The first thing to remember is that above all, it is very much a love story, and it might be described as a story of found, lost and found love. So the story of India is also a story of love.

Now why is this the story of India? The conventional answer is that from the union of Dushyanta and Shakuntala is born the child, the boy Bharata, after whom—according to one of the theories—India got its pre-British and pre-Islamic name, Bharatavarsha. Even today, the linguistic Hindi equivalent for constitutional appellation “Republic of India” is “Bharat Ganarajya.”

The story of Dushyanta and Shakunta starts with the king going on a hunting expedition. Chasing his quarry, he approaches a hermitage, the hermitage of the Rishi Kanva. Kalidas, who is such a great poet, talks about how the horses are themselves inflamed by the closeness of the game. The hunt is on, the king's sinews are taut, and he is about to release the arrow. Just then a young renunciate, a novice, from the ashram stands in the way of the king: “O King, stop, because this is a protected animal, this deer belongs to the hermitage of Rishi Kanva.” The king immediately gives the command to rein in the horses. Kalidas tells you that the horses are actually disappointed because they were so keen to go through with the hunt, sensing how close to the deer they were. The reigning in of galloping horses is, of course, a metaphor for the superior man's control of his own senses and passion, which can draw him away from his true nature. The king shows his mettle through his capacity for restraint.

Then this young hermit says, “Well done. You have acted as befits the house of Puru; you are supposed to be the protector of the weak, and this defenseless deer, which is running for its

life, shouldn't be killed for sport. In any case, it is not a wild animal, but belongs to the hermitage." The King is taught rajdharma, the duty of Kings, by the forest-dwelling hermit. Now to fast-forward, the king gets down, goes to the ashram where he meets the enchanting and utterly virginal Shakuntala, they fall in love, and have a Gandharva Vivaha, a kind of love marriage. Interestingly, more than 80% of the marriages in India are still arranged, but in that ancient story, the progenitors of the nation go through a simple and secret marriage by a simple exchange of garlands, with the moon and stars as witness. Dushyanta goes away, promising to send for his wife later. Shakuntala is listless, thinking of her beloved husband, when the very short-tempered rishi, Durvasa, comes to the hermitage. So immersed is Shakuntala in anguished love, that she neglects her duties to the distinguished guest, who promptly curses her: "He whom you are thinking of now will forget you, as you have forgotten your obligations and duties to your guests."

What a crisis! When her companions hear of it, they rush to the aid of Shakuntala, pleading with the sage to revoke it. But that is impossible; the words of a sage have to come true. Mollified, perhaps by a good meal and some warm hospitality, the sage offers to mitigate the effects of the curse. "If you show him something that he has given you, he will remember who you are again." As the story proceeds, we find that Dhushyant does not send for his wife and poor Shakuntala, in the meanwhile, finds out that she is pregnant. So she decides to go to the court of the king to present herself to him.

On the way to the palace, while bathing in the river, she loses the ring that the king had given her. The city, with its palaces and bazaars, is a different world from the sylvan hermitage where nature is itself as yet unfallen. Here, money and power rule human relations. When she announces herself to the King, he says, "Woman, I don't know you." In the skeleton story in the Mahabharata, Shakuntala's response is much more spirited. But in Kalidasa, she is much more delicate, thus a figure of pity. Her escorts from the ashram also leave, saying the matter is now between her and her husband. The King, owing to Durvasa's curse, has forgotten who Shakuntala is. Alone and abandoned, she goes away, bearing the king's child, unbeknownst to him.

After her departure, Dushyanta is extremely sad. He doesn't know why. I think this is one of the tragedies of the human condition that somewhere in our hearts is a yearning, a quest, for something much deeper than our mundane, material reality, and we don't know what it is that our heart really craves for. Dushyanta too cannot find any solace in the pleasures of his palace. Several days pass, but he is unable to fathom the mystery of his melancholy.

Then, (un)luckily for him, the ring is restored; a fish in the river swallowed it; a fisherman found it after cutting open the fish; the King's guard's arrested the fisherman trying to sell the royal signet. So the ring is the mnemonic device which reminds him of his lost beloved. Now his mourning has a cause and thus probably worse than the earlier sense of unknown loss.

Some years pass. The King is invited to fight for Indra, the King of the Gods, because there's a war going on between the Gods and the demons. The Gods win, with the help of humans, which I think is also interesting for us. Dushyanta is sent back from heaven to earth in a winged chariot, flying first class, you see, and stops off at another hermitage, that of Maricha Rishi. There he sees a fearless lad playing with lion cubs. He picks up the child much to the consternation of the on-lookers, asks, "Whose son are you?" The child resists and says, "Don't touch me; my father is the King and no one else can pick me up." The boy's words come true as the inmates of the ashram rush out to find Shakuntala's long-separated husband come back. The boy is Bharata. He grows up to be a great king and gives India its traditional name.

Now I come to the crux of the story: there are two journeys to two hermitages in Shakuntala. The first is to the hermitage of Kanva Rishi and takes Dushyanth to Shakuntala. The second takes Dushyanth to the hermitage of Marich Rishi and restores his child and, as it were, his lost love and wife back to him. The two journeys, to me, are symbolic, as also the two chariots in which they occur. The first chariot is earth-bound; in it the king almost kills an innocent deer for his pleasure and later finds, marries, and abandons his love, Shakuntala. This journey results in brief happiness, but long desolation. The second chariot is actually a heavenly vehicle, the golden chariot of the Gods in which Dushyanth comes back to earth from the sky-realm. It is this chariot that restores his wife and child back to him.

I have a brief quotation from a very lovely modern edition of Shakuntala, which I recommend. Called *Shakuntala, or the Ring of Remembrance* published by Auroville Press, it is a very small book, just a hundred pages, actually retold from Sanskrit to French, and then it has been translated, or adapted into English, by Roger Harris. Here's the quotation: "Love born in the paradise of childhood and innocence is regained, transmuted, and magnificently widened in another paradise that one could call divine. As there are two chariots, a terrestrial and a heavenly one, so there are two journeys, one, through the forest that leads the king to a world of marvelous purity, and the other through the regions of the sky, that brings him to a universe of light. From the union of the two is born Bharat, the support of the world." So here we have the first meaning of India, to support, which is one of the roots of the word Bharat—

in modern Indian languages, bhar means weight, that which is borne. That is why I spoke earlier about India's responsibility, what India needs to do not just for itself but for the world, what it must be to live up to this expectation.