
Abhigyan Shakuntalam

(Abhijnanashakuntalam in Sanskrit)



PROF. BALAKRISHNAN NAIR

Kalidasa: Main works

I Plays

- *Malavikagnimitram*
 - ➡ Love story of Princess Malavika and King Agnimitra
- *Vikramorvasheeyam*
 - ➡ The tale of love between the celestial damsel Urvashi and King Pururavas
- *Abhijnanashakuntalam*
 - ➡ A drama in 7 acts
 - ➡ A drama in 7 acts

II Epic poems

- *Raghuvamsham*
 - ➡ Narrates 30 generations of Raghu's race (including Sri Rama)
- *Kumarasambhavam*
 - ➡ Recounts the marriage of Shiva and Parvati

III Lyrical poems

- *Meghadootam*
 - ➡ First "Sandeha Kavya" (message poem)
- *Ritusamhara*
 - ➡ Describes the 6 seasons with its impact on human life

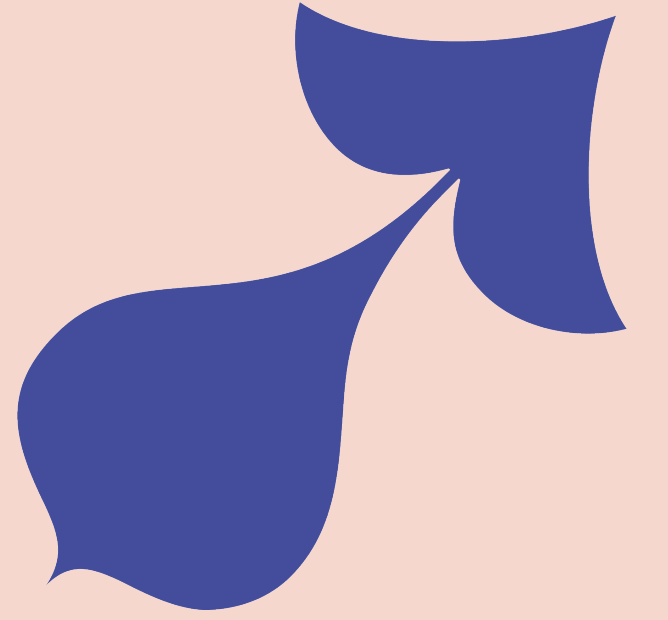
Kalidasa Timeline

- No definite information
 - Almost none of ancient authors of India can be definitely determined
- Different Western scholars variously saw Kalidasa's time as between 1st C BC and 4th C AD (500 years' gap!)

(200 years, 250)

Corroborative evidence

- Sunga dynasty of King Agnimitra, the hero of *Malvikagnimitram*, Kalidasa's first play, reigned until 150 BC
- Kalidasa is believed to have been among the "Navaratna" (nine gems) of King Vikramaditya whose reign marked the Vikrama era from 57 BC
 - ➡ Therefore he must have lived in 1st C BC
- Place of living also unknown
- Ujjain, most referred city in his works, believed to be where Kalidasa spent the major portion of his life



Abhijnanashakuntalam

- Plot sourced from *Mahabharata* (from *Shakuntalopakhyanam*)

Original Plot Summary

- While hunting, King Dushyanta reaches Sage Kanwa's hermitage
- Meets Shakuntala, Kanwa's foster daughter
- They fall in love and marry as per "Gandharva rites"
- Sage Kanwa sends pregnant Shakuntala to Dushyanta's palace
- On Dushyanta's rejection, a divine voice declares Shakuntala blameless
- Their son, Bharata, establishes an empire; land named after him — Bharat/ India



“In poetry, drama is considered the best & among dramas,
Shakuntalam is the best” (1) (also see Act IV)

“. . . Kalidasa, the chieftain among poets, is the charm of the
damsel of poetry” (2)

Free translation of verses on *Abhijnanashakuntalam* (1)/Kalidasa (2)

Abhijnana- shakuntalam

About the title

Note these
points!

- “Abhijnanam” means signet/ memento
 - ➡ When leaving, Dushyanta gifted his signet ring to Shakuntala. But she loses the ring in a stream, on her way to Dushyanta’s palace
 - ➡ Sage Durvasa had cursed Shakuntala (an invention by Kalidasa) that she would be forgotten by the one she pined for. He added that as release from the curse, any token of remembrance need be shown
 - ➡ On reaching the palace, due to the curse, Dushyanta doesn’t remember Shakuntala
 - ➡ She is rescued by Menaka, her celestial mother and taken to the Ashram of Mareecha/ Kashyapa
 - ➡ Later, when Dushyanta gets the ring, he remembers Shakuntala and is deeply remorseful
- “Shakuntala who is remembered with the signet; the drama based on her is *Abhijnanashakuntalam*”

Shakuntala's Origin story

Note these points!

- Indra, head of the Devas (celestials) is wary that people performing penances might challenge his position
- This paranoia drives him to try pose hurdles to disrupt the meditation of ascetics through even devious ways
- Naturally, when Rajarshi Vishwamitra tries severe penances, Menaka, the celestial damsel, is sent by Indra to disrupt the attempt
- Vishwamitra is smitten by Menaka and a girl is born to them
- Abandoned by her parents, the child is taken care of by 'Shakunta' birds
- Witnessing this, Sage Kanwa takes charge of the child and names her Shakuntala

Act I (Beginning)



- Starts with a “Nandhi” (‘Mangala Sloka’ i.e. benedictory verse) (refer **Video Session 1; 24:10 to 27:18**)
 - ➡ Prays that Shiva as ‘Ashtamoorthy’ protect all
- It is followed by Prelude (“Presthavana”)
 - ➡ The Director (“Soothradhara”) comes on stage
 - ➡ Gives the title of the drama
- Drama opens with King Dushyanta in hot pursuit of a fast deer
- He is about to shoot the deer with an arrow when some ascetics appear and appeal not to harm it as it belonged to the “ashram” (hermitage) of sage Kanwa, now on a pilgrimage.

Act I (Contd)

- King Dushyanta enters the hermitage dressed as a common man
- He spies on the merry talk of Shakuntala with her companions, Anasuya and Priyamvada (another of Kalidasa's inventions)
- Dushyanta, enchanted by her beauty, keeps watching when a bee bothers Shakuntala and her friends tease her to try call the King
- On this cue, Dushyanta appears and helps her. Shakuntala is instantly impressed with his gallantry and good looks
- Posing as a palace employee, he learns about Shakuntala
- To relieve her of a task, he gifts a ring to Priyamvada who is awestruck by the King's initials on it. Dushyanta explains it as King's gift



Act I (Conclusion)

- News spreads in the hermitage that King Dushyanta has come on a hunting expedition
- There is an alert on the intrusion of an elephant into the ashram premises
- The girls, like everyone else, are about to leave to escape danger
- But, totally enamoured of Shakuntala, Dushyanta is hesitant to leave



Notable points:

Anasuya & Priyamvada

Episode of the Wild elephant

- (Both Kalidasa's creations)
Their interactions help trace the emerging love between Dushyanta and Shakuntala
- Is suggestive of the disturbances in the peaceful ashram life consequent to the arrival of King Dushyanta

Act II (Start)



- Prelude shows the “Vidooshaka” (jester) Maddavya
 - ➡ He doesn’t want to follow the hunting party
 - ➡ King Dushyanta loses interest in hunting as he is deeply in love with Shakuntala
 - ➡ Orders his commander to halt the hunt and let peace reign
- Dushyanta confides (to Maddavya) his love for Shakuntala; cites that as the reason of his losing interest in the hunt
 - ➡ Those times, Kings usually chose princesses/ upper class girls
- Maddavya enquires if she is worthy of royal love; Dushyanta replies that born of an “Apsara,” (heavenly nymph) she is eligible enough for him

Act II (Contd)



- Maddavya wants to know if Shakuntala has the same feelings towards Dushyanta; Dushyanta is positive that she does
 - ➡ While leaving, Shakuntala looked back on some pretext
- Episode of Shakuntala looking back in pretence of a sharp grass scraping her foot (**Ref Video Session 1; 50:20 to 53:12**)
 - ➡ Went a few steps forward and then turned
 - ➡ Posed to free her garments that were not actually entangled in the vegetation
 - ➡ Proof that she shares the same emotions towards Dushyanta

Act II (Contd)



- The Ashram residents are happy to host King Dushyanta as they were facing problems with demons disrupting their rites
 - ➡ They request Dushyanta's protection against such disturbances
 - ➡ Finding a reason to prolong his stay, he gladly accepts their plea
- Dushyanta orders his party to return to the palace, choosing to stay back alone at the ashram (to pursue his love with Shakuntala)
- A messenger reaches from the "Rajamatha" (Queen mother) requesting King's presence to conclude a vow she had undertaken
 - ➡ Fasting vow is generally ended with a "parana" (sip of water)
- In a dilemma, Dushyanta decides to send Maddavya in his place

Act II (Conclusion)



- Maddavya was like a son to the Queen mother
 - ➡ He is eloquent but talkative
 - ➡ Dushyanta fears his secret love for Shakuntala might be revealed
 - ➡ Tells Maddavya that his affair with Shakuntala as a joke
- Dushyanta thus manages to convince Maddavya to keep his secret
- Also, Dushyanta succeeds in staying back at the ashram on the pretext of protecting the inmates
- Using the chance, Dushyanta plans to pursue his love of Shakuntala

Act III



- “Vishkambha” (Prelude before an Act)
 - ➡ Soliloquy of an ascetic
 - ➡ Declares that the rites at the ashram were running smooth
 - ➡ Meanwhile Shakuntala was love-sick and moody
- Dushyanta gets to a “latha nikunjam” (bower of creepers) and overhears Shakuntala conversation with her companions
 - ➡ She reveals her love for Dushyanta to Anasuya & Priyamvada
 - ➡ Priyamvada suggests writing a love letter to the King
- Shankuntala’s letter to the King on a lotus leaf (**Ref Video Session 1; 1:02:25 to 1:04:14**)

Act III (Contd)



- Happy to learn that Shakuntala loved him, Dushyanta steps out to reaffirm his love for her
 - ➡ “Love heats up your heard but burns mine”
- Anasuya advices Dushyanta to look after Shakuntala in such a manner as to relieve the anxiety of her relatives
- Dushyanta promises Shakuntala top priority in his harem
- Shakuntala’s companions leave the lovers free to their private moments
- Then Gautami, an aged lady ascetic, arrives to check on the well being of Shakuntala

Act III (Conclusion)

- Prompted by Shakuntala, Dushyanta hides from Gautami
- Then an alert warns them of demons at the ashram trying to disrupt the sacrifices and ceremonies
- Dushyanta leaves to confront the demons as he promised



Act IV

- Most important Act in the play
- Links these two parts:
- Kalidasa's creativity:

• Kalidasa's creativity:

- "...in *Abhijnanashakuntalam*, the Act IV stands supreme"
- "... and within Act IV, 4 stanzas (Quadruple) are specially notable"

Dushyanta & Shakuntala tale

- Acts I-III: meet, love, marry
- Acts V-VII: reject, rescue, reunite
- Curse of Durvasa and the Signet ring mentioned

Act IV



- “Vishkambha” (Prelude before an Act)
 - ➡ Anasuya is anxious about no updates after Dushyanta left for his palace
 - ➡ Dushyanta had given his signet ring to Shakuntala; promised she will be ceremoniously welcomed by a royal escort soon
 - ➡ Priyamvada is worried of Sage Kanwa learning of Shakuntala’s marriage and her pregnancy
 - ➡ While Shakuntala is engrossed in thoughts about Dushyanta, she fails to receive and respect Sage Durvasa (off-stage)
 - ◆ the extremely short-tempered sage curses her that whoever she was thinking of, will forget her
 - ➡ Priyamvada entreats Durvasa for relief from the curse; he relents to let the person remember her if Shakuntala shows a token of remembrance

Act IV (Contd)



- ➡ Shakuntala, sensitive and soft-hearted, is kept blissfully unaware of the curse
- Act IV opens with Priyamvada telling Anasuya that Sage Kanwa, with his powers to divine, is well aware of all that happened in the ashram
 - ➡ He had already arranged for Shakuntala to be sent to Dushyanta
- Kanwa's feels deep sorrow the day Shakuntala leaves for King Dushyanta's palace (**Ref Video Session 1; 1:25:33 to 1:28:57 – 1st among the best Quadruple**)
 - ➡ Reveals his intense affection towards his foster daughter, despite being an ascetic

Act IV (Contd)



- Kanwa blesses Shakuntala (**Ref Video Session 1; 1:29:48 to 1:30:57**)
 - ➡ Refers to King Yayati's high regard of dutiful wife Sharmishta
- Kanwa deposes trusted disciples to accompany Shakuntala
- Kanwa requests flora and fauna to bid farewell to Shakuntala (**Ref Video Session 1; 1:31:35 to 1:34:40–2nd among the best Quadruple**)
 - ➡ Shakuntala had fostered a fawn from birth and named it "Deerkhapanga" for its elongated eyes; she entrusts its care to Kanwa
 - ➡ Shakuntala also had a jasmin creeper named "Vanajyotsna" from which she seeks permission to leave for the palace
 - ➡ Nature attributed human characteristics and emotions

Act IV (Contd)



- Kanwa sends a message to Dushyanta (**Ref Video Session 1; 1:38:10 to 1:43:20–3rd among the best Quadruple**)
 - ➡ At once humble and cautionary in tone
- Kanwa's advice to Shakuntala (**Ref Video Session 1; 1:43:35 to 1:46:20–4th among the best Quadruple**)
 - ➡ Counsel how to happily coexist with the King's other wives
- The Quadruple presents the varied aspects of love
 - ➡ A father's love for his daughter
 - ➡ Man's love with natural phenomena, its flora and fauna
 - ➡ Affection of cohabitation among partners

Act IV (Conclusion)

- Kanwa's final blessing to Shakuntala (**Ref Video Session 1; 1:47:01 to 1:50:00**)
 - ➡ "May my wish befall you"
 - ➡ The lovers are sanctified by separation
- Act IV constitutes the most important portion of the Play

